



An Exploration of English as a Foreign Language teachers' attitudes towards curriculum
design and development at the English Language Teaching Department in the Syrian
Higher Institute of Languages

Submitted by
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Abstract

This study presents the findings of an in-depth exploration of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' attitudes towards and experience of curriculum change and development at the English Language Teaching (ELT) department in the Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus, Syria. Syria considers English to be a second language and thus the EFL curriculum has not been afforded as much attention as the core subjects, such as Arabic. In the last two decades, Syria has witnessed some major changes within the area of education. Educational change in the Syrian context is seen as an important means of keeping the citizens updated with other events taking place worldwide. In 2009, the Syrian Ministry of Education adopted a change in the EFL curriculum intended to improve the general level of English to facilitate the country's modernisation and the implementation of information communication technology (ICT). However, the results appear to have been negligible and therefore, and as part of the strategic guidelines of reforms in higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education continues to attach considerable importance to restructuring research in higher education institutions and to establishing a 'programme for creating appropriate evaluation mechanisms and methods concerning curricula and institutions for EFL' (2004).

*In evaluating this strategy by the Syrian government, this study, carried out at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages at Damascus University, has been guided by three objectives. The first is to investigate how EFL teachers' use the current ELT materials. The second involves identifying the main challenges faced by EFL teachers in using the ELT materials available at the Institute. The third objective explores how EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a potential curriculum and whether this involvement can indeed contribute to the quality of the new curriculum. By using an interpretive research design and exploratory methodology, the study used semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires as primary data collection methods to elicit the views of EFL teachers at the Institute. Significant findings are highlighted in each of the three areas. With regards to **methodology**, it was found that many EFL teachers mainly tend to favour and employ communicative language teaching approaches to their teaching. Concerning the **challenges** faced in the ELT classroom; the study found that various problems such as: lack of motivation; rigid administrative rules; incorrectly-placed students; time limitations; difficulties in achieving goals and objectives; and professional development challenges, all cumulate in predominantly negative perceptions of the current Syrian EFL teaching materials. Finally, EFL teachers have different **attitudes** towards the design and implementation of the new EFL curriculum. They can tend to see it as a mandatory and onerous task, and often feel that they lack the high-level of awareness and understanding required to design an appropriate curriculum. Mixed reactions towards changing the existing curriculum, needs assessment, and process evaluation are also apparent. These results suggest that any attempts to change the Syrian EFL curriculum would face a number of challenges. The thesis recommends the inclusion of teachers and students in the process as one possible solution to combat problems relating to the EFL curriculum within the Higher Institute of Languages and that of other institutions in Syria.*

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Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to my late father and my mother for their
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It is also dedicated to my husband Bahaa and my sons Kais and Laith*

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List of Abbreviation

CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CEFR	Common European Framework of Foreign Language
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTD	English Language Teaching Department
ESA	Engage, Study, and Activate
HIL	Higher Institute of Languages
INSET	In-service Training
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MoH	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
NTFL	National Test of Foreign Language
RQ	Research Questions
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Curriculum Change

Curriculum change and educational reform have been of worldwide interest for several decades (Wedell, 2009). By definition, curriculum broadly refers to the overall totality of student experiences occurring during the process of education (*ibid*). If this complete experience is not attained, the curriculum is likely to be changed to meet the students' needs. Since the late 1960s extensive research has been conducted worldwide addressing issues concerning education and curriculum change (Hargreaves, 2005; Carson, 2005). The reasons behind educational change vary depending on the context. However, a common consideration appears to be the need for educational change to support other developments in different areas of society as a whole and to improve selected national policies so that students can cope with the rapidly changing world and international realities (Wedell, 2009).

Curriculum change has been at the forefront of much educational reform in many developed countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada (Sharma *et al*, 2013). Developing countries generally want to be on a par with developed nations in matters related to quality of education. Furthermore, the general requirement for skilled and motivated citizens has prompted the re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of educational systems to be able to educate learners to meet intrinsic national needs. Educational change involves the introduction of new programmes to provide learners with the knowledge and skills essential for them to become informed citizens in a world of new technologies and increasing globalisation. Nevertheless, the programmes themselves cannot bring about a change unless the most influential factor in that change, the teacher, is able to translate these new programmes into action (Blosser, 1984; Fullan, 1982; Koballa & Crawley, 1985; Laforgia, 1988; Roberts, 1988; Duffee & Aikenhead, 1992).

1.1.2 Implementing educational change

Despite the fact that there is a growing interest in improving the educational systems in most Arab countries, there is still insufficient research to address some of the distinctive problems and challenges that confront teachers during large-scale educational reforms and changes (Akkary, 2014). Akkary (2014), explains that one of the main shortcomings of these large scale educational reforms in the Arab countries lies in the inability of new educational services of making any noted changes in the quality of classroom practices and achievements and consequently its failure in preparing learners for 'the demands of a postmodern technological world' (p.180). The present study, which focuses on the issue of curriculum change and development in the Syrian context in 2010, seeks to make a contribution to this area by adding to the corpus of research that investigates the scope of curriculum change in a national context, both theoretically and empirically.

This introductory chapter aims to provide the rationale for the study, which aims to investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' views and experiences of curriculum change and development and attitudes towards it at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages (HIL) context. It describes the problem, outlining the phenomenon under study. It also provides the purpose of this study, its overall significance, its aims and objectives, as well as outlining the specific research questions. Finally, this first chapter presents the plan and the structure of the whole thesis.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

1.2.1 English language teaching and curricula

As previously discussed, several reforms in education have taken place in Syria recently, whereby perhaps the most important ones have been at the curricula level and particularly with the ELT curricula. In effect, fundamental changes have been implemented and new English syllabi have been introduced. As such, English had already been introduced as a compulsory subject to be taught from the first grade of the primary school as early as 2000. Before this, English used to be taught from the fifth, and previously even the seventh, grade of basic education in schools. Such

changes have had a great impact on the field of ELT at all different levels within the educational system in Syria. However, in the process of this change, the gap between the English taught throughout the pre-university years and the English taught during the years at university has widened and remains a key challenge in the face of such a change. To this end, it is necessary to address issues related firstly to the influence these changes have had on English language teaching at university level, and secondly to investigate the possibility of other ELT curricula reforms.

The recent reforms in ELT curricula at university level have come at a time when most policy makers and stakeholders both inside and outside the academic institutions appear to believe that the old curriculum in its traditional form has become obsolete both academically and economically and that a radical change needs to be brought about as soon as possible (Abdul Wahed, 2013). Therefore, and as part of the strategic guidelines of reforms in higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education has afforded much importance to restructuring research in higher education institutions and to establishing 'a program[mme] for creating appropriate evaluation mechanisms and methods concerning curricula and institutions' (Abdul Wahed, 2013, p. 20). To this end, more efforts have been made to develop a new curriculum based on solid research relating to individuals' needs and objectives, and at the same time the teaching materials have been subject to substantive modification and change. In other words, policy makers have become acutely aware of the main challenges facing Syria's higher education system and the demand for tackling a number of its challenging issues.

Therefore, as a result of having made innovative changes and developing a new ELT curriculum in my context, the teaching processes require more careful consideration and reflection, informed by teachers' knowledge, perceptions and experience of implementing and using the teaching materials they have in hand. In addition, there needs to be an exploration of the ways in which aspects of curriculum change can be related to broader social, political and cultural domains in our society, along with developing further understanding of the influence of relating micro

relations of classroom practices into macro relations of society and the future of ELT education, as suggested by Pennycook (2001).

Therefore, I strongly believe that the issue of ELT curricula change in my specific context is worthy of exploration, especially from a cultural perspective. Additionally, due to the noticeable absence of EFL teachers' 'voice' and agency in the process of designing new up-to-date textbooks, it seems also worthwhile at this point to attempt to ascertain the appropriateness of these teaching materials for students at the Higher Institute of Languages from the teachers' perspective. Finally, due to the interdisciplinary nature of such an investigation, engagement with pedagogy theory as well as cultural theory has been incorporated into the approach.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

1.3.1 Research Aim and Purpose

The major concern of this study is to investigate EFL teachers' attitudes and experience of curriculum change and development at the ELT department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. The study aims primarily to describe the necessity for such an investigation into curriculum change, along with highlighting the need to define some linked concepts and to employ them within the curriculum context (Carl, 2009). Thus, the study aims both to describe the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages and to explore how the EFL teachers' involvement in curriculum design and evaluation might be effective in improving the quality of any potential new curricula, by shedding some light on what demands such an involvement might have upon teachers making substantial adjustments to their own thinking and practices. Finally, the study also aims to fill the gap in the literature investigating the issue of curriculum change and development in general, and EFL curriculum change in particular in the Syrian context.

1.3.2 Objectives

The study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate EFL teachers' practices using the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages.

- To identify the main challenges for teachers in implementing current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages.
- To explore how these EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a new curriculum and whether this involvement can have any positive effects in improving the quality of any eventual new curriculum.

1.4 Research Questions

Within such an understanding of curriculum change and development in this particular context, I attempt to bridge some of the aforementioned gaps and to tackle some of the issues that might accompany that change at all different levels with particular reference to the research context. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the practices used by EFL teachers for the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?
2. What is the nature of the challenges for EFL teachers in implementing the ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?
3. How do EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages view the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation?

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.5.1 Defining quality standards

The significance of the study stems from the importance of defining the quality standards of ELT curricula in order to help in the process of curriculum development and change within a wider social and cultural perspective. More specifically, the study derives its importance from the context it explores; that is; it attempts to give an account of the way EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages (HIL) view ELT curriculum change, incorporating strategies for embracing and using it and any associated problems. The study demonstrates the significance of EFL teachers' perceptions and awareness of curriculum change and their potential role in and contribution to eventual curriculum design and implementation.

1.5.2 Exploring ‘real’ teaching practices

Similarly, the empirical research provides a comprehensive review of the teaching practices used by EFL teachers at the HIL, in their classroom while implementing the materials. Reviewing the teaching methods and practices used in the classroom in addition to an evaluation of the quality of teaching forms an important part of the development of any curriculum. These processes are often deemed to be the ‘action-in-process’ towards maintaining success in the learning-teaching processes. It is hoped that results of the study will help policymakers and curriculum designers to pay more attention to the important role that teachers play in curriculum development and in doing so, creating a more dynamic atmosphere for teachers where they can orientate their teaching methodology in such a way as to develop a closer rapport with their students in classroom settings.

1.5.3 Awareness of issues with curriculum implementation

Moreover, the empirical research provides an inclusive understanding of the problems and challenges EFL teachers at the HIL may encounter whilst teaching the current materials during their courses. Understanding the nature of the challenges the teachers encounter while implementing the materials could benefit both policy makers and curriculum designers. By the latter carefully taking these obstacles into account when designing any new curriculum, the effectiveness and efficiency of the subsequent implementation of that curriculum, could then be open to close scrutiny and monitored. Policymakers might also consider the high importance of having on-going teacher training courses to avoid any weaknesses and inconsistencies in curriculum delivery and of having well-structured methodology for teaching that can facilitate content delivery for the students to effectively absorb it. It is also hoped that the results of the study will motivate the EFL teachers to develop themselves professionally, so as to increase their ability to be more effective in using and applying research strategies and teaching methods. It is also hoped that the findings of the study regarding teaching challenges in practice will provide valuable information to decision-makers and stakeholders to inform them during the process of their making any necessary changes and improvements to the ELT curricula.

1.5.4 EFL as a conduit to global issues

The study also aims to extend understanding about how EFL teachers make sense of their participation in designing a new ELT curriculum. Thus, the crucial aspiration here is to present a more detailed diagnosis of current problems with the ELT materials' and to promote the development of an ELT curriculum from EFL teachers' perspectives in the Higher Institute of Languages. Educational change in the Syrian context is as an important means of keeping the citizens updated with other events taking place globally. In 2009, the Ministry of Education in Syria decided to make some major changes to the EFL curriculum in an attempt to make its citizens more competent in and familiar with the English language, at the same time as making it easier for the nation to modernize, adopt, and incorporate much more information communication technology (ICT).

Additionally, the study is deemed to be significant because it is the first comprehensive evaluation project carried out on ELT curriculum change and development at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. As such it could serve as an example and prototype for further studies using an interpretative research approach. The study mainly investigates EFL teachers' attitudes and experiences of curriculum change and development at one of the Syrian Higher Institutes of Languages (HIL). Specifically, the context of the study is the ELT Department at the HIL at Damascus University. This institute offers different types of language-related courses, for example: language courses, teacher-training courses, and ESP courses. (c.f. section 2.5.2. for details about courses offered by the Institute). The teachers in the ELT department at the HIL, Damascus are carefully-chosen based on their qualifications, experiences and skills.

Finally, the study seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the development of educational theory and practice, not only regarding the Syrian ELT curriculum, but also in the broader area of curriculum studies, which can be implemented in different educational settings and national contexts.

1.6 Thesis plan

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the study aims, the rationale, and a statement of the research problem. In addition, the research questions are presented together with the overall significance of the study. Chapter two describes, in detail, the context of the study, reviewing some of the main aspects in Syria and shedding more light on the educational issues and the state of teaching English as a foreign language in the context of the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. Chapter three reviews some of the related literature, based on the three major areas of research, which underpin this study, namely: curriculum change and development; TEFL processes and challenges and teachers' attitudes towards curriculum development. Chapter four provides a theoretical and philosophical framework of the methodology in terms of its ontological and epistemological underpinnings. It also describes the adoption of an exploratory methodology and its relevance to the nature of the present study. In addition, methods of data collection, data analysis, and research ethics are all outlined. Chapters five and six describe and discuss the data collected in the field of the study and the main findings. Finally, chapter seven provides a conclusion and summary of the findings as related to the literature and the overall contribution to the field, as well as outlining the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

1.7 Summary

Curriculum viewed as a whole should respond to the expectations and aspirations of students at whatever level they may be at in the educational process. Syria as the country being studied here happens to be geographically located in the Arab world where English is the second language. In order to come to terms with technological advancement and the rapid rate of globalisation, the country has been compelled to make English a language accessible to and well-known by its citizens as most external changes are channeled through that language. As a consequence, the Syrian curriculum has been exposed to terms such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English Language Teaching (ELT).

The aim of this enquiry is to investigate EFL teachers' attitudes and experience of curriculum change and development at the ELT department in the Syrian Higher Institute of Language. This aim is achieved by carrying out the following: a) investigating EFL teachers' practices with the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages; b) identifying the main challenges in using the ELT materials available at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages; and c) exploring how these EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a new curriculum and whether this involvement can have any positive impact upon improving the quality of any potential new curriculum.

CHAPTER II

STUDY CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

As highlighted in the first chapter, many developing countries have recently been involved in taking the fundamental steps to improve and develop their educational systems (Mulenga, 2001; Andereotti, 2006). There has been a distinct trend in certain developing countries towards promoting and adopting more flexible teaching methods in order to encourage learners' creativity and innovation. For example, a great many of the educational institutions in the Arab world have recently been engaged in substantial educational reforms where they have relied on such processes as studying their existing educational situation in its different settings and contexts along with the associated problems like the case in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria, for example (Al Heeti & Brock, 1997; Bahloul, 1999; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Troudi & Alwan, 2010, Akkary, 2014).

In the Syrian context, where the field of education is similar in status to many other countries in the region, several educational reforms have also taken place over the past few decades, including reforms at curricula level. This chapter presents detailed information about the background to the study, outlining the main educational developments in the Syrian context that have taken place in recent years. In the first instance this research project provides an overview of the latest reforms and changes within the Syrian educational system and the relevant historical background. It then continues on to describe the current situation with regard to ELT in Syria at the level of both school education and higher education, with special emphasis on the newly-adopted textbooks. Finally, it addresses the ELT issue at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages along with the most notable changes in this area.

2.2 Country Profile

Before describing the country's educational sector, it is necessary to consider some important background information about the Syrian Arab Republic and the setting against which this study takes place. Historically and geographically, the Syrian Arab

Republic has often functioned as the geographical keystone in the Middle East. It is located near the regional heart's, where there are centralised and enhanced patterns of landforms, climates, and travel routes. Damascus and Aleppo have played key roles as commercial and cultural centres for 3,500 years, and Syria's cereal belt has served as a granary for empires over many centuries. The population of Syria was estimated at 16,305,659 in July 2000, an increase of 3.4 percent from the 1990 population of 12,116,000. Syria has an area of 185,180 square kilometers. The population is overwhelmingly young, with 41 percent below the age of 15 and only 3 percent older than 65. The capital city of Syria is Damascus and the other major cities are: Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, and Hama. (Encyclopedia of Nations, 2011).

2.3 The Syrian Educational System

2.3.1 Essential nature

Since 1967, all aspects of management in Syrian schools, colleges, and universities have been under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. That is, any kind of administration has been under government supervision, including curricula development, reform, or change as outlined by the President of Damascus University, 2011. Education in Syria, at all its different levels, is provided for free by the state, as it is considered a right for every individual living there. This has resulted in the nation to functioning in accordance with the constitution which promotes free education for all. The universities open their doors annually with free tuition fees to all successful applicants who have passed their Baccalaureate exams, taken in the last year at secondary school, and to those who have satisfied the necessary university entrance requirements (Dalbani, 1992). Dr. Mualla, the current President of Damascus University states that,

'the attendees of higher education are demanding, and it is their right. And they, just as the entire nation, expect the university to provide the best for their children to ensure their future and meet the needs of development. This is a national demand that the university is making great efforts to achieve' (Mualla, 2011).

The number of enrolments for university education is estimated at more than 150,000. This in turn has increased the literacy rate in the country for people over the age of 15 year-old citizens (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011).

The following section provides an overview of the complete educational setting against which this study takes place. An important consideration lies with the external factors which are influential upon the ELT departments in the Higher Institute of Languages. First, the study sheds some light on the educational system in Syria at school and higher education levels. Then, it describes the ELT context in these two educational institutions with special emphasis on the English teaching materials used.

2.3.2 Education in schools

From 1981 to 2002, schooling was divided into six years of compulsory primary education, three years of lower-secondary education (known as elementary education), and three years of upper-secondary education. However, in 2002, a law was passed whereby elementary education and primary education were combined into one basic education stage and education was made compulsory and free from grades one at the age of six to grade nine at the age of fifteen (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). General secondary education offers academic courses and prepares students for their university entrance. The last 2 years of this stage are divided into literary and scientific branches. This system was established in 1967, when the country signed the Arab Cultural Unity Agreement together with Jordan and Egypt, introducing a uniform school system in the three countries and determining curricula examination procedures and teacher training requirements for each level (Collelo, 1987).

In the mid-1980s, Syrian education policies reflected the official intention of the Baath Party to use schools to teach the masses its principles and beliefs and to make school training responsive to the nation's economic needs (Syria, Education, 1987). Since then, enrolments at the various school levels have increased sharply in numbers and as a result, the demands for education have increased as well (Collelo, 1987). Parallel to these changes at school level, other changes have been taking place simultaneously at the level of higher education. Annual enrollment, for example, has also increased at the institutes of higher learning, colleges and universities and the aims and objectives for change in the systems have been

reconfigured accordingly. Figure 2.1 below demonstrates the structure of the education system in Syria.

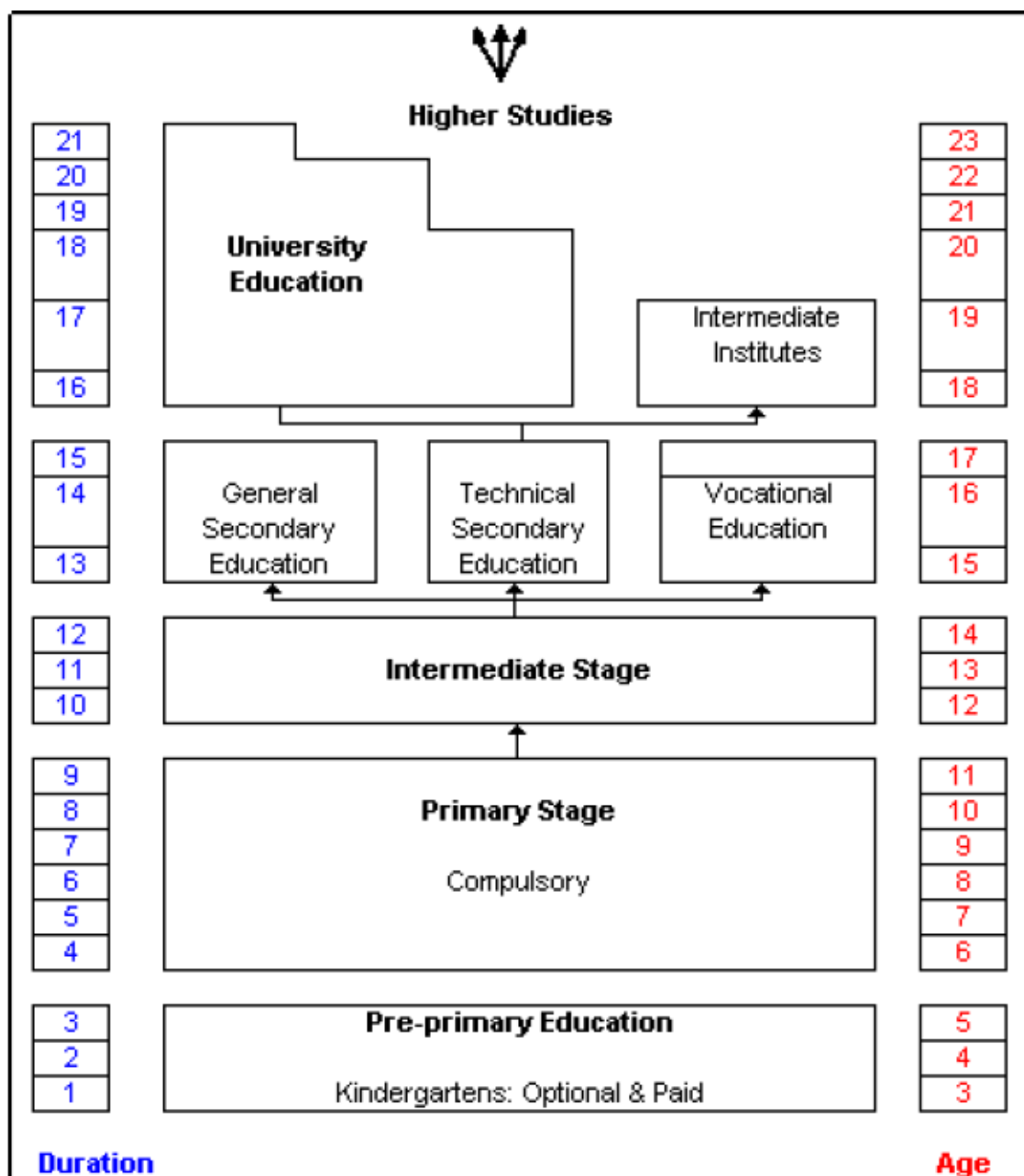


Figure 2.1 The structure of the Syrian Education System as adapted from World Data on Education, (2010/2011)

At the curricula level, schools in Syria have witnessed a very radical change with their curricula in all different subjects and levels. The new curricula were introduced for the first time in the study year 2010/ 2011. This curricula change is considered as a new initiative as it is the first time in the educational history of Syria where the curricula has been changed right through from the kindergarten level to the final year

of secondary school (Minister of Higher Education, 2010). In this regard, Dr. Saad, the Minister of Education (2010), stated in an interview prior to the implementation of the new curricula that more than 150 books have been designed and published for all the different educational levels. These are books which are all considered new for their up-to-date content and their more progressive ways of teaching and which are of a similar quality to other school curricula worldwide.

2.3.3 Governance structure in the public sector

Any decision regarding a change of the educational strategy or the introduction of a new curriculum is made by the Ministry of Education. The hierarchy of power and decision-making in the Syrian public sector schools can best be described as a top-down process, as illustrated in Figure 2.2 below, whereby the Ministry of Education is at the top of the pyramid and the learners are at the very bottom of the pyramid. Everyone in the educational structure gives instructions to the one below in the same pyramid (Jesry, 2014).

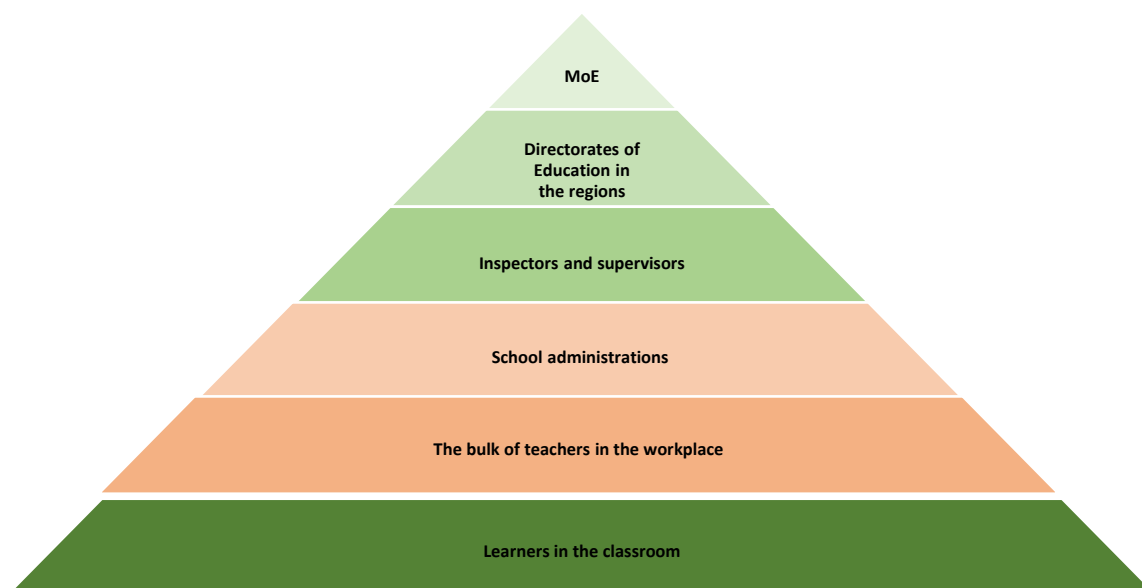


Figure 2.2. Hierarchy of authorities and distribution of power in Syrian public Schools. (Ministry of Education, 2010 as in Jesry, 2014, p. 29)

Jesry (2014) illustrates the responsibilities of each one in the pyramid as follows: (1) The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting the main decisions and goals of education at public-sector schools, such as defining the curriculum and its objectives, distributing schools over the country and writing and supervising the national examinations.

(2) The Directorates of Education in the regions are responsible for choosing inspectors and supervisors from the unit of experienced teachers to guarantee that the educational plan set by the Ministry of Education is implemented correctly in schools.

(3) The school administrators are responsible for positioning teachers at different grade levels and in the classrooms inside the schools; setting the teaching schedules and rules and maintaining discipline at the wider level of the school, together with checking both teachers' and students' attendance.

(4) Refers to the bulk of teachers in the workplace. The teachers come into direct contact with the curriculum, pupils and classroom life. However, they are not expected by the higher authorities to assess or make general decisions about the educational process; they are to strictly follow the plans and textbooks set by the higher authorities in the educational hierarchy.

(5) At the very bottom of the pyramid are the learners with very little influence on the education and processes that they are required to receive (*ibid*, pp.28-29).

2.3.4 Higher Education

Academically, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education in 1984 supervised four main universities. These were respectively: Damascus University at Damascus, Aleppo University at Aleppo, Tishreen University at Latakia, and Al Baath University in Homs. Damascus University is the oldest university in the Syrian Arab Republic. It was established in 1901 and was previously named the Syrian University because it was the only university in the country. The university encompasses 24 faculties and 121 departments located in Damascus, Daraa, and Sweida. Aleppo University was founded as the second university in the country in 1958. The university encompasses 23 faculties and 109 departments located in both Aleppo and Idleb. Tishreen University was established in 1971, under the name of Latakia University. Then in 1975 it became Tishreen University. It has 21 faculties and 106 departments. Finally, Al Baath University was established under Law number 44 in the year 1979, centrally located in Homs, and includes 21 faculties, and 78 departments located in both Homs and Hama (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). It is worth mentioning that these universities are linked directly to the Higher Education Board by Law number 1 of 1975, and Law 6 of 2006 for organising universities, and that the Board

is directly linked to the Ministry of Higher Education (*ibid*). In other words, the four universities offer the same education all around Syria. They all have the same organisational structure, and all have the same objectives, goals, and strategic plans.

2.3.5 Challenges and issues

Although the number of colleges is increasing and new university branches have already been established to match the numerous students who are continuing their higher education, public demand remains strong, reflecting the importance of education as a channel of growing social and economic mobility. The government has continued to expect the educational system to provide trained citizens to meet the economic and political needs of society in general. Thus, as part of an attempt to provide more resources for education to match the rate of population growth, legislation was passed in 2001 allowing the establishment of some private universities and colleges, as well as some new higher institutions (Collelo, 1987; Abdul Wahed, 2003).

The establishment of private universities was allowed to 'provide the best education and contribute to raising the level of higher education, scientific research and increasing university learning opportunities' (Syrian Ministry of Higher Education Document, 2010). Except for the private universities, all higher education institutions are state-controlled and state-financed and consequently the state is responsible for all kinds of administration in these institutions. The university year goes from September to June and the language as a medium for instruction is Arabic.

With an awareness of the numerous challenges facing the higher educational system in Syria and the overarching need to tackle a number of issues threatening the quality of its educational provision, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education in 2004 had a vision concerning the reform of higher education. This vision stemmed from some important points related to the aims and objectives of the process of improving the quality of higher education and resulted in a plan and strategic guidelines to be followed during the ensuing years. Therefore, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education (2004) based its vision for the reform of higher education on basic

essentials, that is: (1) to promote sustainable human development and economic growth; (2) to offer more resources to the higher education sector, and (3) to focus on implementing and considering optimum ideas in policy design. In other words, higher education in Syria has been front of mind in the national consciousness because of the pressures of globalisation in the area of the economy as well as that of professional services, and the rapid growth in transformation of information and communication technologies (Abdul Wahed, 2003).

2.3.6 Modernisation and reform

In effect, rules and regulations have started to be reformed, 'to pave the way toward modernisation and development, stressing the role of education and developing human resources to be the turnkey of the comprehensive development and subsequent task in every sense' (Syrian Ministry of Higher Education Document, 2010). The ministry's main objective behind the reform strategy was to 'create the appropriate conditions to improve the quality, relevance and efficiency of higher education in order to build the human and social capital required for economic growth and social development' (*ibid*). It was hoped that such objectives would be attained through achieving: '(a) the universal completion of compulsory education of good quality, (b) internationally competitive performance standards of learning achievement, and (c) education system effectiveness in building human capital and engendering social cohesion to support the development of a knowledge-based economy' (Syrian Ministry of Higher Education Document, 2004, pp. 17-18).

2.3.7 Higher Education Governance Structure

The power structure in the higher education system is also centralised with a hierarchy of authorities and decision-making. This hierarchy was explained by the University Regulation Law No. 6 that was passed in 2006. Figure 2.4 (as adapted from Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012, p. 610) presents the structure of the Syrian higher education system and the allocated roles and responsibilities for each level of the hierarchy regarding the processes of curriculum development and capacity-building. The Ministry of Higher Education is considered as the central authority for decision-making regarding educational policies, including curriculum change and design, teaching aims and objectives, and teaching materials and support (Farhat, 2012).

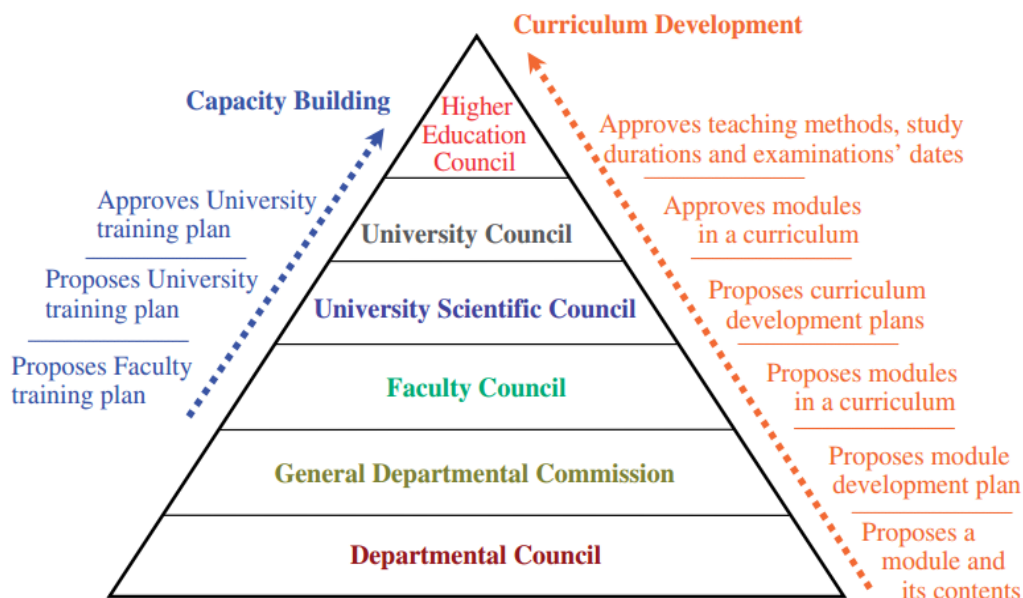


Figure 2.3 Hierarchy of authorities and decision-making in Syrian Higher Education system and assigned roles and responsibilities for curriculum development and capacity building. (Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012, p. 610)

As can be seen, at the top of this pyramid is the Council of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) together with the Representatives of Universities, and of Ministries of Education, Planning, Higher Education, and Health. The Council of the MoHE is responsible for decision-making and the planning of scientific research in higher education at all Syrian universities, including the different disciplines and levels with respect to the country's general agenda (Farhat, 2012). In this governance framework, approvals for curriculum development and capacity building are centralised and limited to the University and Higher Education Councils (Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). The next level of this hierarchy comes with the University Council, which consists of the President of university, the Vice-presidents of the university, the Deans of the universities, the Deans of the higher institutes, the Representative of the MoHE, and three students representing the National Union of Syrian university students. Besides approving the university curriculum, some of the other responsibilities of the University Council lie with: making suggestions regarding the deployment of university teachers; researchers, technicians and administrative staff; proposing the organisation of conferences, seminars and meetings related to e-learning; setting the rules for the acceptance and the enrolment of new university

students; and suggesting the establishment of new faculties, departments, and/or institutes, etc. The next layer in the pyramid comprises the University Scientific Council which has responsibilities such as proposing the internal regulations of colleges, institutes, and centres, and proposing study plans and curricula development for study.

At the next level of the pyramid comes the Council of Faculties, which consists of the Dean of the faculty, Deputy Deans, Heads of departments, two representatives of the National Union of Syrian University Students, and a representative of the University Teachers' Association. Some of the responsibilities of the Council of Faculty may include: setting the rules relating to monitoring students' progress, lectures plan and other university responsibilities, suggesting faculty curricula and teaching programmes, organising and distributing faculty exams, etc. (University Regulations Law, 6/2006). In this University Regulation Law (2006) curriculum is seen as 'a set of modules to be formulated by Departmental Councils before passing to the Faculty Council *en route* for approval. It does not advocate integrating or contextualising subjects' (Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012, p. 610).

The last two levels in the hierarchy are the General Departmental Commission and the Departmental Council which are responsible for proposing and developing study modules, proposing the distribution of both theoretical and practical lessons, lectures and seminars, and developing an annual report on the activities of the department (University Regulations Law, 6/2006).

2.4 The ELT context in Syria

2.4.1 The place of English in Syria

English is well-recognised as an internationally powerful language. The language has been well-established worldwide for a variety of reasons most importantly among which Phillipson (1992) states are 'British colonialism, international interdependence, revolutions in technology, transport, communications and commerce, and because English is the language of the USA, a major economic, political and military force in the contemporary world' (p.23). Therefore, people around the world often find themselves under economic, political, educational, and

cultural pressures to learn English, especially in countries where English is used as a foreign or a second language (Zughoul, 1999). As is the case in many other Arab countries, the English Language context in Syria is experiencing an ongoing and drastic change. In recent years, learning English has become a top priority in educational and government circles in Syria (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). English has been acknowledged as being essential in helping the country to gain ground and status within the areas of globalisation and IT. English is viewed, in the English language curriculum for the compulsory school stages, for example, as a means of promoting relations, understanding and cooperation between Syria and other countries of the world (Syrian Ministry of Education Document, 2004). It offers the opportunity of relating Syria to the wider world and of facilitating the economic, technological, and educational improvement of the country (*ibid*). To this end, English has consolidated its position as a highly-desirable language to learn, and consequently some progress has been made in terms of ELT curriculum reforms, where the process is clearly still underway.

The English language in Syria has had an important status for many years. As early as the 1940s, French was also a key language that was introduced into the Syrian secondary schools. However, English became more popular in the 1950s, resulting in the French language losing its ten-year monopoly in Syrian schools (Khoury, 1986; Rajab, 2013). Since then English has gained ground, achieving an uncontested popularity. English is now the foreign language of communication of choice in sectors such as science, tourism and commerce (Ministry of Education, 2010). Because of its global importance, English was given a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) curriculum in 2004. The objective of this kind of a curriculum is to action better English language teaching strategies, more in common with the more contemporary EFL curricula in other countries. Furthermore, this also resulted in English being introduced and taught at the lowest grade, Grade 1, rather than Grade 7, the age at which students used to start learning English at school previously. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and UNICEF (2008) add that some of the resources that were introduced at secondary school level to improve teaching and learning English also included state-of-the-art language and computer laboratories.

2.4.2 English and the Syrian education system

The English language is a compulsory language taught at secondary and university levels in the Syrian education system. At secondary school level, the language is taught on average in four or five, forty-five minute classes each week (UNESCO & IBE, 2011). EFL classes are the key source of exposure for students to a foreign language. However, the learning process has been criticised and met with extensive frustration by the students, policy-makers, and parents (Daoud, 1999). The key challenge facing many of the students is that the English language is a very challenging language for them (*ibid*). This is because of the high use of their first language, e.g. Arabic or other Syrian languages such as Armenian, Syrian Turkmen, etc. both by students and their parents. The main challenge experienced in learning the English language is with the use of idiomatic expressions and pronunciation. Additionally, after the students have learned the language in class, there are very few opportunities for them to use the language in their daily activities. The EFL classes are also very utilitarian, uninspiring and often not challenging enough for students to want to explore more of the language (Rajab, 2013).

The Syrian Ministry of Education has the mandate and responsibility for embracing, approving, and implementing any new curricula and books in a foreign language. Before 2004, many schools followed an English curriculum that was structurally orientated and designed in a way to produce a uniform and rigid structure nationally. As a result, many teachers strictly followed the structure of the curriculum and the national textbooks to the letter. This contributed to the low quality of EFL studies as indicated by Rajab (2013). In order to alleviate this situation, the Ministry of Education introduced a new English curriculum that was largely based on communicative methodology. It was compulsory for all students joining school to be taught using a textbook called *English for Starters (EFS)*, published by York Press of the UK. This new curriculum has been designed in such a way that more emphasis is laid on the use of communication methods that are widely considered to be helpful and important for EFL students.

2.4.3 The benefits of learning English

In Syria, this means that learning English is generally held to be vitally important for international success. A wealth of opportunities and ventures may open up in the international business community and markets to those with an excellent knowledge and mastery of the English language. English is the third most-widely spoken language in the world. Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990, in Nie, 2000, p. 1) observe that 80% of all the information in the world is stored and consumed in English. As an official language, English is the one used in most official and bureaucratic transactions. Equally, English tends to be the main language for international affairs, commerce and global trade. Focusing specifically on the tourism industry, most tourism officials speak to tourists and other immigrants in English. Technological advancements have incorporated English as the primary language of communication to the outside world. Most software applications and programmes are designed in English; hence, it is imperative that its users are well-acquainted with the English language. The principal language of the World Wide Web has always been English, even though tremendous progress has been made to adopt language-translation software. Quite apart from software; computer hardware, manuals, peer-to-peer networks, websites, installation guides, and product fact sheets tend to be mainly written in English.

Students from Syria wishing to advance their studies as international students in Europe, America, Australia or any other part of the world, are generally required to have a good mastery of English. This is because the medium of instruction in class tends quite often to be English. The top medical, business, and even law schools in the world are often located in countries where the native language is English. This may also be the case for students wishing to do research. Some of the most acclaimed technologists, engineers, and scientists have written a lot of their material in scholarly journals and periodicals, which students usually refer to in English. Great Britain and the United States of America as nations have had a significant influence on international political affairs and relations. Hence, English has been generally accepted the world over as one of the primary languages for conducting international affairs and politics.

A basic knowledge of English is necessary for diplomats representing countries in global affairs and at diplomacy forums. Lastly, knowledge of the English language opens up a multitude of opportunities for employment and business advancement in foreign countries, in which English is the primary language. International business and multilateral corporations such as the United Nations employ personnel with a good command of English as part of their multilingual and diverse skills. Another institution in the same vein is the Commonwealth of Nations that favours professionals with advanced knowledge of written and spoken English.

2.4.4 ELT teachers in Syria

In order to teach at secondary school level, teachers are expected to have a university degree. More specifically, EFL teachers are teachers who have graduated from universities and acquired degrees and diplomas in English Literature and the English Language. In 1997, the Syrian government passed a regulation that the Faculty of Education should be responsible for EFL teachers' and assistant teachers' training. However, the decision was only put into action in 2002 when these universities were allowed to upgrade the qualifications of teachers (Rajab, 2013).

As EFL teachers go through their undergraduate studies, they are taken through different forms of British and American English literature, studying genres such as prose, drama, poetry, world literature, comparative literature, and literary criticism. As well as the different forms of literature, students encounter subjects that are based on the English language, such as linguistics, grammar, composition-comprehension, translation, and socio-linguistics (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). It is for this reason that the undergraduate programme does not feature any teaching methodology lessons or practice. However, after graduating the students are perceived as being competent teachers of EFL literature and language. This has raised a major concern about the actual quality of the EFL teaching that teachers do. As a result, taught units and modules concerning teaching methodology and research methods have been introduced into EFL teacher-training programmes at university.

2.4.5 Issues for ELT teachers

This is a new plan that allows students of the English language to develop their skills independently. However, there are external factors that further prevent more teachers from acquiring a degree in English Literature and Language. Teachers in Syria have traditionally been amongst some of the most underpaid and overworked people in the country (Daoud, 1999; Rajab, 2013). In addition to that, and up to very recently, there was a general perception that this degree was a 'feminine' degree (Rajab, 2013). This resulted in most of the people in the teaching profession being mostly female. However, with modernisation, more and more men are now joining the profession as EFL teachers. Nevertheless, there has been little improvement made to the low level of teachers' pay. Hence, many of the teachers take up second jobs in other professions or conduct private tutoring for students (Daoud, 1999).

Students who take a Diploma in Educational Studies are not qualified to teach EFL studies. The diploma qualification has been in existence for many years. However, its primary aim is to give aspiring teachers a pedagogical or professional approach to teaching. Nevertheless, most teachers of EFL continue to apply lecture-based teaching strategies, which do not incorporate practice and the application of theory into students' understanding. This implies that not only should these teachers learn English literature and English language at university, but they should also be equipped with pedagogical approaches that they can go onto to use in teaching EFL. As a result of the inadequate delivery of EFL by many teachers, the Syrian government is now even stricter about teacher qualifications (Rajab, 2013). For the first five years of their training, English language teachers are expected to work in areas with low literacy levels in Syria. One of the primary roles of the Training Department at the Ministry of Education is to organise educational programmes and to provide training for teachers (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). This training is carried out in different parts of the country. The main difference between the INSET (In-Service Training) and the PRESET (Pre-Service Training) programmes is that the INSET programme is given to teachers only when deemed necessary. The effect of this has been that after the 2004 introduction of the English curriculum at schools, there has not been much investment made in order to train and help the teachers to deliver the new curriculum (Rajab, 2013).

2.4.6 ELT at School Level

The ELT context at school level in Syria has undergone many changes recently. English was firstly taught from the age of thirteen; grade seven at the basic educational stage at schools, up to the age of eighteen, the last year of secondary school. That is, students used to study English for six years before continuing their studies at university. Then, in 1994, the Ministry of Education passed a new policy that introduced English at the age of ten, grade five in the basic educational stage at schools. Finally, in 2000, schools started to teach English from the age of six, the very first grade at school. Here, new ELT curricula have been also introduced and presented to students in a regressive way which did not stabilise until the 2008 – 2009 school year for grades one to seven, and 2010 – 2011 for grades eight to ten (Hana, 2010). The reason behind this change was attributed to the need to introduce a new updated curriculum which would be appropriate to the age of students according to the national standards of teaching English (*ibid*).

Like other subjects; such as chemistry, history, and biology among others, English is taught as a subject at all school levels, i.e. it requires 40% of the overall total mark to pass the exam. The teaching hours allocated for English differs from one grade to another and this increases with every subsequent higher grade. Unlike the old curriculum where the emphasis was mainly on vocabulary and grammar, the new curriculum has a more communicative-based approach that covers the essential skills accordingly. The textbooks are prepared by specialists at the Ministry of Education in Syria and the content is chosen to be related and relevant to Arabic history and culture. Although English teachers are expected to use English as a medium of instruction in their classrooms, the use of Arabic is still dominant in such contexts. The reason behind this use of L1, according to Meygle (1997), has been to maintain interaction between the teachers and the students and to avoid any anticipated breakdown in communication.

2.4.7 ELT issues at school

Nonetheless, the ELT sector at the school level still remains unstable and in many cases students as well as their teachers appear to be unconvinced of its value to

them. This has been attributed to the difficulty of the new curriculum on the one hand and the teachers' lack of experience in dealing with this curriculum on the other. That is, when the new English syllabi were first introduced in schools, students found it difficult to cope with the new materials they had in hand because of their perception of their own lack of proficiency and their insufficient motivation to learn a foreign language. This had initially been especially apparent when English had been introduced as a compulsory subject from the first grade of the basic education level at school instead of the fifth or previously seventh grade. Such a change was bound to cause pressures and stress. In other words, this made life uneasy for learners, as well as for parents and teachers to guide the learners through the new materials, as the system had changed so much since the parents were themselves at school.

At the same time, the suitability of the textbook and the accompanying materials for each course has been subject to intense debate. Firstly, questions about the suitability of starting teaching English at this lower level have been raised. Secondly, the general appropriateness of the textbook to school learners has been mooted for debate, as well as the demand for it to be comprehensively evaluated from all angles, including the cultural, social, and educational aspects, in addition to examining the language difficulty level and its suitability for each school stage (Hasan & Raddatz, 2008).

From EFL teachers' perspectives, introducing English as a compulsory subject at that early stage was clearly challenging and demanding, and needed careful attention and reconsideration. However, because classroom practices are determined by the National Curriculum, the new textbooks governed all these practices. The dominance and influence of the textbooks seemed to be connected with Syria's own society and its educational policy, given that the latter is under government supervision and it was written in accordance with the country's educational system policy. Equally, the textbooks were viewed as the tools that teach subject content about social and cultural topics, and the values and beliefs of the related society (Hasan & Raddatz, 2008). Thus, the textbooks constituted the central component in the TEFL teaching process, regardless of the teachers' roles in that process or their attitudes towards it. Consequently, most teachers have tended to

use the textbooks as their main source of information and guidance, because it would have been extremely difficult for them to develop new materials in the light of possible external pressure (Hasan & Raddatz, 2008). Therefore, because of this firm state control on both educational content and instructional practice, the teachers have tended to use a textbook-based teaching approach where 'the textbook plays a paramount role in education as it is considered the primary instrument for carrying out the subject syllabus ... students are evaluated on the basis of information contained in the textbook. So, the content of the textbooks determines the students' examination results' (Hasan & Raddatz, 2008, p. 2). The future of this new ELT curriculum is still vague although it is clear that there is some dissent regarding its implementation.

2.4.8 ELT at University Level

At university level, with the exception of those whose main degree subject is English Literature, English is taught as a foreign language and is allocated between four and six instructional hours a week throughout the period of study (4 or 5 years). In the first and second academic years, the great bulk of English teaching is devoted to the development of general proficiency in written English. Here, all students who are in their first and second year study general English, regardless of their specialisation, using books like *New English File* or *New Headway*. However, from the third year until the students' graduation year, English teaching takes a different direction. It starts to include specific objectives and purposes, which differ according to the students' different specialisation. The faculties in Syrian Universities can be classified into two groups according to their teaching orientation. Thus, the faculties can be either with literary or humanities-orientated studies, such as the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Education, or with scientific orientated studies such as the Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Engineering. Students in the literary faculties need to get a score of no less than 50% of the total mark to pass the English Exam, while in the scientific faculties they need to get a score of no less than 60%.

2.4.8.1 Challenges and issues

Such discrepancies and divisions in ELT goals and objectives at university level have left the people in charge at the Ministry of Higher Education facing perhaps one of

the biggest challenges. This challenge was apparent in their search for development and improvement, when designing new curricula to match the nation's needs, especially in the light of the pressures of globalisation (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). In other words, the process of designing and delivering new curricula has put a heavy burden on policy makers, administrators, practitioners, as well as the actual English language learners. It is worth mentioning here that in addition to the aforementioned challenges facing the ELT sector, universities in Syria are still facing the practical problems caused by the increase in the number of university entrants year after year. For example, the number of new students in general who enrolled at Damascus University alone in 2010 exceeded twenty thousand students, in addition to the sixty thousand students enrolled in the Open Learning system. That is, the overall number of students who were enrolled just at Damascus University for the year 2010/2011 was about one hundred and eighty thousand students (President of Damascus University, 2011). As such, the universities still have problems which affect the quality of teaching in general and ELT especially, for example with: over-large classes, inadequate facilities, and an overemphasis on the reproduction of knowledge and examination-passing (Dalbani, 1992; Meygle, 1997; Daoud, 1999; Fakhra, 2009).

This often culminates in students expressing their frustration and dissatisfaction with these problems confronting them in their university study years. In addition, they can become acutely aware of the gap which exists between the type of English provided during the former school years and that needed for their academic and professional success at undergraduate level and even beyond to post-graduate level and on in their future careers. Therefore, most students tend to take private courses to improve their English skills because of their feeling that the courses provided at university are not adequate enough to meet their needs. In this regard, and in an attempt to address such challenges and pitfalls, the academic and administrative staff at the main state universities in addition to some policy-makers and people in charge, have endeavored 'to accommodate the needs of their huge student population' by providing alternative and improved learning environments for them (Syrian Ministry of Education Document, 2004). Here, distinct 'higher institute of languages' were founded in the four main state Syrian Universities, as a possible way of

accommodating learners' different needs relating to foreign languages, including English.

2.5 Higher Institutes of Languages

2.5.1 Essential nature

One of the chief missions of the higher institutes of languages in Syria is to 'equip their learners with first-class and the most update academic tools of knowledge through foreign languages, and to cultivate critical thinking skills and the spirit of initiative and innovation' (Syrian Ministry of Education Document, 2007). The Syrian Higher Institutes of Languages work to promote the learning of foreign languages in order to increase the value and quality of student academic life by granting them graduate degrees and certificates of qualification. They also offer certificates of specialisation, as well as offering some language teacher-training sessions. In addition, they endeavor to achieve the highest educational standards in the testing and pedagogical processes, while addressing the diversity and unique cultural nature of each of these foreign languages (Syrian Ministry of Education Document, 2007).

The institutes can often have students with a variety of different nationalities, such as European, American, and Asian, amongst others. The language courses held by the institutes are each divided into eight levels, with 50 - 60 hours of classes over the period, and which include language skills such as, listening, writing, reading comprehension, and speaking. However, this might vary from one level or one department to another (Makhlouf, 2011). The courses provided in these institutes are not compulsory. Instead, learners are encouraged to attend them to develop their skills in the specific foreign language where they feel they need to improve. It is interesting to note that these higher institutes are witnessing a rapid growth and development. Consequently, they are undergoing major reforms including changes at the level of educational programmes specifically or the higher education framework in general.

2.5.2 ELT in Higher Institutes of Languages

The English Language Teaching Department (ELTD) is considered as one of the 'outstanding' departments of the higher institutes of languages at each one of the four main universities. They specialise in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Since 2006, the English Language Department has developed into a specialised academic department for language teaching and pedagogical research aiming at:

1. Offering Master's and Ph.D degrees in the field of modern language teaching.
2. Improving the linguistic skills of candidates for future work at universities and in other governmental and public organisations.
3. Becoming a research academy which presents constructive and excellent research in language learning and teaching, as well as in other fields such as the social sciences, politics, economics, and cultural studies, etc.
4. Presenting and researching the role of cultural aspects in language learning and teaching (the Higher Institute of Languages, 2011).

Learners at the TEFL department, like the other departments, study English for a variety of different reasons. These include reasons related to, for example: career development; having access to research articles; travel; understanding foreign languages, and learning the language as an academic subject (Zughoul, 2003). In addition, knowledge of English has become increasingly necessary for securing better jobs not only in the private sector but also in the public one, especially after the introduction of the National Test of Foreign Language (NTFL) as a prerequisite for applying for any state job. The NTFL is organised by the Ministry of Higher Education and carried out in the Higher Institute of Languages. It is usually applicable from the intermediate level upwards and it tests the general English language skills of writing, reading, structure, and vocabulary in multiple-choice questions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). This exam has been introduced by law by the State Cabinet with the objective of improving 'human resources and upgrad[ing] its academic and vocational level ... [and]...develop[ing] the performance and skills of candidates for government jobs' (Farhat, 2012, p.105). The NTFL test has also had

the impact of motivating students to learn foreign languages and to improve their language skills and performance (Barakat, 2009).

Similarly, because passing the NELT has become a requirement for students who are interested in continuing their higher postgraduate studies, many students apply for these courses to improve their English skills in accordance with the level required to be able to pass the English tests.

It is worth noting here that the TEFL department at Damascus University has been hosting an annual TEFL conference for the past ten years. The conference serves as a forum to bring together EFL teachers, from all over the world, and with the aspiration of offering such teachers an opportunity to meet, to present their points of view, and to share knowledge.

2.5.3 English courses at the ELT Department

The department provides a wide range of courses to different groups of learners. Firstly, it provides 'specialised' courses for university students who are interested in improving their proficiency in the use of language in their different special fields such as engineering, science, medicine, etc. Secondly, it runs 'general' courses for university students who are concerned in improving their English language skills because of their personal interest in gaining a higher proficiency level in English, or for them to be able to cope with the level of English required for their academic studies. Thirdly, it provides 'intensive' courses for non-specialist teaching assistants who have attained a scholarship from the university to pursue their higher studies in an English speaking country. These courses prepare students to be able to pass a TOEFL exam with a score of 600 or over, or to pass IELTS exam with a score of 5.5 or over. Fourthly, the department has recently started to provide an MA in Applied Linguistics for postgraduate students who have completed their university studies in English Literature and who both fulfil the enrollment requirements and have passed an oral and written English test.

Finally, the department provides other courses to the university teaching staff, for whom passing these courses is considered a requirement for recruitment or for securing a higher educational position as a member of the teaching staff at the

university. In addition to the aforementioned courses, the ELT department provides in-service training for English language teachers at the university and research facilities for developing English language teaching.

Although the courses provided are not mandatory, once registered on any course, students should achieve an attendance rate of no less than 80%, in order to be entitled to take the examination. The courses are mostly regulated with regard to the number of: contact hours per course, attendance and enrolment requirements, exam components, and pass/ fail scores.

2.5.4 Teaching staff and their responsibilities

Teachers in the ELT departments, like other teachers in the institutes, are carefully chosen according to their academic records, personalities, characteristics, and their fulfillment of the job requirements and specifications. Most importantly perhaps is their feeling that the department can contribute to their academic and social status. Teachers usually apply for this job and are chosen based on their qualifications and skills. All applications are assessed by a committee determined by the Dean and the Head of the Institute and the successful applicants are invited for interviews to assess their oral performance before they are granted the job.

The teaching staff at the ELT department consists of two kinds; the permanent staff and the temporary. Most teachers, if not all, in the permanent staff are teachers who have received a scholarship from the institute to get a Master's degree in TESOL in an English-speaking country. After getting their degree, these teachers have to come back and work in the institute for a period equivalent of double the period they spent abroad. They are required to work for 12-14 hours a week, during which they are responsible for teaching either the university teaching staff (also under the heading of 'professional courses') or the teaching assistants (so-called 'teaching assistant courses'), as these courses are normally offered for free to university staff. These two kinds of courses are taught in the morning, which enables teachers to choose to have more classes in the evening and in doing so make extra money.

The other kind of teachers consists of the temporary staff who are employed by the State in the institute but who get temporary contracts. Teachers in the temporary

staff differ in their academic degrees and work experience. However, most of them are chosen because they have proved to be qualified enough to teach on these courses. Before they start teaching, all teachers in this group get intensive teaching training sessions for around a period of three months. After that, they are considered to be eligible to teach classes, mostly in the evening. Usually teachers who teach the evening classes are responsible for teaching general English to learners who are looking for some language skill improvement. Teachers in the evening classes are just paid for the face-to-face teaching.

In addition to these two kinds of teachers, in 2007 the institutes opened the door to a third group of staff teachers, namely teaching assistants (of whom I am one). This group is considered to be the first group of teaching assistants who have received their scholarships from the Higher Institutes of Languages and who have attained a PhD degree in a specific discipline named by the department to which they belong. The teaching assistants are required, therefore, to come back and teach in their departments after getting their PhDs for a period that is double the period they spent abroad. It is worth mentioning that as of the date of this current research, no teaching assistant has yet come back with a PhD.

Teachers from the three groups are also encouraged to have some other hours teaching English to the non-specialist, first or second year students, at the various colleges at the Syrian universities. Teachers in the ELT departments meet weekly with the head of department to discuss major issues related to the classes, students, and the department's other responsibilities. These meetings have a great impact of enhancing the relationships between teachers and the feeling of belonging to the department and having a responsibility towards: the advancement of ELT in the schools and the development of students who are taught English courses; the experience gained by the teachers, and the ELT department as a whole.

At this point, the important role the English teachers play in the processes of development and change seems unquestionable. As such, teachers are always welcomed and encouraged to express their views and attitudes regarding classroom issues or the teaching materials in hand since they are the ones who use these materials in their classrooms. However, these views are not extended beyond the

scope of these meetings and are not perceived as having that great an impact on policy-making. Usually the Head of the Institute and the Dean of the Institute who are the ones who take decisions and who have the final say about matters regarding the teaching materials and the classroom issues.

Therefore, teachers' participation in this current research study, whether in evaluating the current teaching materials or giving opinions regarding new ones, is viewed as having the potential to yield constructive and informative results. This is especially the case as most of teachers at the institute also teach the English subject for non-English specialist students at university level. Because of such an involvement (sometimes with the same students at university and private courses) these teachers often display an acute awareness of the learners' different needs and requirements as well as some familiarity with the associated aims and objectives of learning English.

Within the scope of these, I aim in my study to further investigate the effective role the English language teachers might play in the process of changing the current teaching materials and developing a new ELT curriculum. I also attempt to display what teachers' attitudes to curriculum change are at both national and international levels with reference to various secondary sources. In addition, I investigate the teachers' different experiences of educational changes and their views about their future involvement in the designing of a new curriculum and its implementation.

2.5.5 Teaching materials

So far, English courses in the ELT departments at the Higher Institute of Languages have been based mainly on English language teaching series and course books, such as *New Headway* or *Face2Face* as teaching materials to cope with the diversity of the learners' needs, goals, and objectives. The books are chosen on the basis that they meet the requirements of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The book that is used currently is *Face2Face*. It is used for the Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate, and Advanced Level students. Each level is divided into two courses and each course is taught intensively for 50 hours over a period of five weeks. According to Chris Redston, one

of *Face2Face* authors, all the language taught in the book is authentic and up-to-date, and the choice of language has been informed by the Cambridge international corpus and the Cambridge learner corpus, and that it meets the requirements of the CEFR.

Each level is divided into seven units following a communicative-based approach as a methodology of teaching. The great bulk of emphasis is on listening and speaking, based on the premise that these are the target skills which most learners wish to attain from a language course. In other words, by improving their listening and speaking skills, learners will be able to communicate more naturally and effectively in real life. Additionally, the listening activities provided in the books help learners to be able to understand natural spoken English more effectively in a natural English speaking context. Besides listening and speaking, the books give an equal weighting to vocabulary and grammar for learners' language development, by providing a new vocabulary section that is relevant to the specific topic in each unit and to the materials as a whole. The learners' books are also provided with some accompanying materials such as a workbook, a language summary, a CD-ROM/Audio CD offering extra practice activities, videos, recording capability and tests which can be customised.

As for the assessment system, in each course there are three quizzes and one final exam. In the first quiz, only reading and structure are tested. In the second, there is an interview in addition to reading and structure, while in the third reading, writing, and listening are tested. The final exam is a test for all the aforementioned skills in addition to an oral test. Each teacher is responsible for preparing the test(s) for his/her students.

2.6 Dramatic change in the Syrian ELT Curriculum and the War

Before 2011, basic education in Syria was free and over 90% of children were enrolled in primary schools indicating the highest amount of students at this educational stage within the Middle East region. Before this, the Syrian government had increased education expenditure by 60% from 2000 onwards. In total there were 3,384 primary-based schools. Additionally, there were quite a good number of higher

learning institutions as well and the Syrian public schools and learning institutions were of good reputation. However, after 2011, the brutal conflict leading to civil war disrupted the education system. Currently, 2.2 million school going children in Syria have been displaced as a result of the conflict (UN, 2014). The collapse of the Syrian education system has been felt most acutely in areas such as Idleb, Al Raqqa, Aleppo, Hama, DeirAzzour, and Dara. Many people have been displaced and are still staying in refugee camps. To this end, both the pupils and students have been barred from attending classes and going through their education.

In effect, the English language in the Syrian context is experiencing an ongoing and rapid change. However, these are recent events and the scope of the study refers to the time before 2011. Nevertheless, the contribution from these efforts did not necessarily lead to robust knowledge of foreign languages in Syria. Therefore, the government took an initiative in 2009 and introduced the concept of EFL teachers and ELT courses to encourage international languages to be assimilated in this region dominated by Arabic. Additionally, the new ELT curriculum was developed in 2011 before the war erupted. Therefore, the study has not been intrinsically and greatly affected by the recent war currently unfolding and taking place in Syria. The information provided is therefore true to the time before the change (war) occurred. Although data was collected in 2012 right after the war has started, it was collected from Damascus University which was not greatly affected at that time by the war like the other places around the country

2.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have provided the context to the study where I have reviewed in depth the background to the main reforms and developments in the Syrian educational system in general and in the Higher Institutes of Languages in particular. Firstly, I have presented a description of the chief characteristics of educational factors at the levels of school education and higher education with a special reference to their historical development. Afterwards, I have provided a description of the major ELT concerns in these two educational settings. My special emphasis centres on the context of the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages: the internal context of the study, shedding the light upon the ELT departments, the courses being

taught there, the teaching staff, and the teaching materials. Some of these factors might appear not to be completely relevant to the study. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study aiming to attain a deep understanding of the issues of educational reforms and curriculum change in Syria, I claim that these factors are quintessential in achieving the main purpose of the study. I see the educational system in Syria, like any other educational system worldwide, to be similar to a chain where each factor has an influence and is a prerequisite for the presence of the other. In sum, the ELT curriculum change and development is taking place rapidly and it is hoped that in the near future Syrian citizens will be fully comfortable in using foreign languages just as they do with their first language, Arabic.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature on the topic of curriculum change and development. Firstly, it presents in detail an identification of the conceptual thinking that informs the term 'curriculum' in my study, drawing attention to the four major curriculum classifications as presented in curriculum theory: curriculum as a body of knowledge, curriculum as a product, curriculum as a process, and curriculum as praxis. Secondly, it provides an overview of the construct of curriculum development and the main issues which pertain to it. The special emphasis, in this regard, is on the English language curriculum and its main components in the curriculum development process. Consequently, it reviews the concept of change in curriculum, highlighting literature in the area of educational change, as well. It also presents a detailed explanation of the notion of teachers' attitudes, focusing on how this relates to curriculum change, development, and innovation. Alongside this a general review of the concept of curriculum development is provided.

To further the objectives of the study, English language (EL) curriculum development in particular has also been taken into consideration. Additionally, the various components involved in EL curriculum change and development are detailed. Subsequently, it deals in depth with the dynamics involved in EL curriculum change in the Arab world, in general, and in the context of the educational changes taking place in Syria. Literature on teachers' attitudes towards educational change and their professional development is also reviewed, so as to frame the study in its rightful context. Lastly, the challenges faced within EL curriculum change and development, especially in the Arab educational context to which Syria belongs, are discussed in detail. In sum, these variables are related to the analysis of teachers' attitudes toward and experience of curriculum change and development in the English Language Teaching Department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages, which is the overarching aim of the study.

3.2 Curriculum Approaches

Curriculum has been investigated in a wide range of different of studies. Consequently, any attempt to identify a logical conceptualisation that informs the term 'curriculum' in the present study requires a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of curriculum within a wider range of curriculum theories, views, and insights. Between theory and practice, researchers tend to approach the concept of curriculum from various perspectives.

3.2.1 Curriculum ideology

Mckernan (2008), for example, identifies six major curriculum concepts based on the theoretical constructs in literature and the value orientations of teachers that he derives from survey data. These concepts are: i) intellectual-rationalist; ii) theo-religious; iii) social-romantic; iv) technical-behavioural; v) personal-caring, and vi) critical-political. When addressed in turn, McKernan's classifications can be seen as follows:

i) Intellectual-rationalist ideology is considered to be the earliest idea of curriculum, first seen in the development of education in the Greek and Roman states and dating back to Platonic Idealism. This ideology holds the idea that truth is immutable and that curriculum should only include the best selection of this 'true' knowledge. Thus, studies like mathematics or music should be permanent subjects in curriculum. Schools, according to this view, 'do not exist to meet all forms of social need or special extracurricular activities for these would ultimately take away time required for intellectual and worthy academic pursuits' (Mckernan, 2008, p. 28).

ii) Theo-religious ideology, on the other hand, focuses on education for religious purposes. The oldest schools were in Iraq (the Tigris Valley) in around 6000 BC. Religion was the primary basis of many of the oldest institutions in Europe and, in fact, can be considered as the catalyst for the establishment of public and private education in North America. The institutions established under this ideology historically defined their curricula based on the doctrines and values of the establishing religious order.

iii) Social-Romantic ideology prioritises the child's interests and needs as a source of knowledge, rather than focusing on the content to be taught. The main purpose behind using a child-centred human development approach in education is to prepare the child for integration into society and thus to be more sociable and democratic. For advocates of this approach, like Dewey (1910) and Kelly (1989) (in Mckernan, 2008, p. 29),

curriculum begins with the child and his or her nature as the source, and the teacher's role changes to be a facilitator and an advisor rather than an expert and a judge.

iv) Technical-behavioural ideology views education as a base for preparing students for the world of work. The main emphasis of curriculum is to prepare students for careers and work and to participate in the world of globalisation. The effectiveness of the curriculum is measured on an accountability basis, in which both teachers and students are considered accountable for the results of their performance.

v) Personal-caring ideology places the child's growth, welfare, learning and development at the centre of education. It is seen to exercise its, 'humanistic curriculum features' in which it, 'signals an emphasis on self-actualization, inner harmony, self-respect and the dignity and worth of persons' (Mckernan, 2008, p. 30). Students in this curriculum ideology framework need to learn how to make decisions about their values and make choices that eventually affect their personal welfare and spiritual being.

vi) Critical-political ideology attempts to reveal the underpinning values of the curriculum. It views schools as agencies, which present the political and cultural standpoints in society. It considers matters that support equality in schools, and analyses any social and environmental issues that affect school performance. It also promotes student understanding of controversial issues, such as gender relations, inequality, racism, etc., and attempts to advance processes of values illumination. Critical ideology seeks to empower all those who work in the school at the same time.

Curriculum theorists have also employed various approaches to the classification of curriculum approaches. Of these, the following four approaches have been identified in literature as perhaps the most prominent: curriculum as a body of knowledge, curriculum as a product, curriculum as a process, and curriculum as praxis (Smith 1996, 2000). According to Smith (1996, 2000), these have been considered in the light of Aristotle's significant categorisation of knowledge into three disciplines: the theoretical, the productive, and the practical.

3.2.2 Curriculum as a body of knowledge

Curriculum in the first model, curriculum as a *body of knowledge*, is viewed as a body of knowledge presented through experience (Becher & Maclure, 1978; Elliott, 1994) and as a syllabus/ canon to be transmitted to students (Smith, 1996, 2000). In the former view, curriculum is equated with the teachers' experiences through which

they present the 'content' to their learners (Alwan, 2006). It goes 'beyond what is prescribed or defined officially to include learning activities encountered by students, set by teachers or recommended by individual schools' (*ibid*, p. 53). In the latter view, meanwhile, curriculum tends to be equated with a broader term, which is 'to be transmitted to learners.' The curriculum and syllabus are essential factors in any educational institution. However, it is important to note that not many educators see a difference between the two terms.

The curriculum in this first example has been defined *practically*, in that it 'informs teachers, students, parents, teacher educators, assessment developers, textbook publishers, technology providers and others about the goals of instruction... [it] provides direction, clarity, and focus around worthy ends, without interfering with teachers' decisions about how to teach' (Ravitch, 2010, p. 231). A syllabus, meanwhile, is referred to as being a part of curriculum, specifically, that which is 'concerned with the specification and ordering of course content or input' (Nunan, 1988, p.14 in Christison & Murray, 2014, p. 5). Hence, curriculum as a syllabus is used in this approach to mean 'a concise statement or table of the heads of a discourse, the contents of a treatise, the subjects of a series of lectures ... it is connected with courses leading to examinations' (Smith, 1996, 2000). Based on this statement, curriculum and syllabus are two terms, which are used interchangeably in many contexts. In addition, when an approach of curriculum focusses mainly on syllabus it is then only concerned with the content (Smith, 2000).

3.2.3 Curriculum as a product

Curriculum in the second model is viewed as a *product*. Curriculum here is used as an attempt to attain certain 'technical' concerns regarding the outcomes in students. It is heavily dependent on the learners' *behavioural* objectives. That is, unlike the first model, the emphasis here is on the *learners'* experiences, acquired through their learning events and classroom activities, rather than those presented by the teachers (Reid, 1975; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Hargreaves, 1994; Rodgers, 1994; Marlow & Minehira, 1996). Within these concerns, as Smith (1996, 2000) points out, the curriculum should provide a clear notion of the outcomes and

objectives to be attained, such that it describes on which basis the content and the method are organised and how the results will be evaluated.

However, this approach to curriculum has been criticised for its lack of a social vision to direct the process of curriculum construction. In this regard, Smith (1996, 2000) draws attention to a number of prominent issues regarding this model. Firstly, the 'voice' of the learners is neglected in such programmes, because the paradigm exists outside their learning experiences and, as such, educators must also play the role of technicians as well. Secondly, there are questions around the measurability of objectives, such as whether it is to measure the impact of learners' experiences on their outcomes and achievements or to measure the teachers' actual pedagogical practices towards those objectives in their classrooms. This latter point has been highlighted in numerous research studies on curriculum studies (Stenhouse, 1975; Cornbleth, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Lamie, 2005; Smith & Southerland, 2007; Looney & Klenowski, 2008; and Orafi & Borg, 2009, for example).

3.2.4 Curriculum as a process

In the third model, curriculum is viewed from a wider perspective: as a *process* or a framework of processes. It is the cumulative interactions of teachers, learners, and knowledge (Smith, 1996, 2000; Alwan, 2006). In other words, curriculum in this model is an inclusive process, which combines sets of objectives, content, teaching methods, and evaluation processes into a more holistic approach. Referring to Stenhouse's (1975) definition of curriculum in the light of this model, 'Curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to *critical scrutiny* and capable of effective translation into *practice*' (pp. 4–5) [*emphases added*]. It is comprised of both aspects: *content* and *method*, placed in their widest application taking into account the problem of implementation in the institutions of the educational system (*ibid*). In this regard, teachers need to have the ability to think critically during the different processes of curriculum implementation; this includes their own understanding of their pedagogical role, before they actually start to teach, in their actual classroom practices, and in their ability to critically evaluate the outcomes. Unlike the product model, which tends to direct attention to teaching, the process model shifts the focus

to learning, such that learners are no longer objects, as in the former model, but subjects in the process (Smith, 1996, 2000). However, although this model is more comprehensive than the previous two models, it allocates less attention to the context in which learning takes place. In addition, the model is 'dependent upon the cultivation of wisdom and meaning-making in the classroom. [Therefore,] if the teacher is not up to this, there will be severe limitations on what can happen educationally' (Smith, 2000, p.45). Along these lines, Brown (1995) and Richards (2001) have similar views of curriculum as an active interactive process, with particular focus on the way in which individuals create understandings and practices, as well as meaning.

3.2.5 Curriculum as praxis

The fourth model, curriculum as *praxis*, is viewed as a development of the process model. However, it diverges from the process model with its emphasis on the interests of *commitment* to human emancipation, rather than being simply informed by general principles of judgment and meaning-making. Praxis refers to the activity that aims to ensure that the well-being of humans is realised. This realisation, moreover, is contained in the fact that a progressive development of the purposes is pursued and understood within the activity (Freire, 1972). This model implies that the academics within the education sector should not just focus on the group or individuals, disregarding the process employed by the group/individual to create practices and understanding, together with their respective meanings. The attention should also be trained on the commitments that are usually demonstrated in practice, with regard to the exploration of the practices and values of the educators. The value emphasised in this case is 'human emancipation' (Freire, 1972). Additionally, education practitioners are expected to be committed to praxis and to explore their practices together with their peers. In the model, dialogue and the practice of freedom are put forward as the core of education.

Curriculum as praxis, therefore, focuses on a committed action to explore educators' attitudes and their practices. In other words, practitioners committed to praxis are expected to have the ability to reflect on their own practice, and thus exhibit an awareness of the theories involved by presenting and evaluating best practices in

specific situations. Curriculum approached as praxis goes beyond being just a plan to be implemented. It is 'constituted through an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated into the process' (Grundy, 1987, p.115). It also involves the notions of change, quality of the learning experience, voice, equality, and social justice, among others. Emphasis is often placed on the curriculum targets, together with the quality experienced by the students.

Such an approach is comprised of the critical theorists' emphasis on the relationship between critical method and the emancipatory perspective (Chapman & Hobbel, 2010; Luke *et al.*, 2013). Their belief is that the curriculum's role is to liberate the students from the oppression of both society and the curriculum. Their interest is, therefore, geared towards the process of gathering evaluative data to demonstrate how a curriculum can liberate a student from oppression to opportunities and freedom (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1997, p. 321). As such, the quality of learning is enhanced by listening to the voice of students. Additionally, as suggested by Luke *et al.* (2013), the concepts of curriculum, syllabus design, and equity are interrelated by stating that the syllabus adopted as part of the curriculum should be equitable and, thus, avoid turning it into a source of oppression to the students. This involves the development and establishment of a holistic curriculum, which relieves the learners of expectations of their performance. In addition, the development of the syllabus must be in line with the existing curriculum and must concentrate on good content delivery to students, with a view to making them knowledgeable and responsible members of society, and thus assuring the notion of change.

Moreover, Chapman and Hobbel (2010) present another dimension through the lens of social justice pedagogy across the curriculum. This model argues for the practice of freedom during curriculum change and reformation by taking into consideration the interests and concerns of the learners. In other words, the curriculum and the syllabus extracted from the bigger picture should not be a form of discrimination and mistreatment imposed by teachers and policies to learners. Hence, these two schools of thoughts expound on the praxis model as an inclusive theory as far as

both curriculum and syllabus development is concerned, and the practice of which is for the benefit of the learners.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

After reviewing the main conceptual approaches to curriculum, this section will attempt to clarify and justify the conceptual framework of curriculum that informs the current study. Clearly, the term 'curriculum' means different things not only to different people, but also within different contexts. Literature shows that all approaches have something of value to offer (Kelly, 2004). However, each of these approaches has some limitations when considered from different angles and from a wider perspective. Approaching curriculum as a *syllabus*, for example, limits curriculum planning to the 'content' to be 'delivered' to recipients, whilst disregarding the overall rationale; making it more likely 'to hamper rather than to assist the planning of curriculum change and development' (Kelly, 2004, p.4). Similarly, although approaching curriculum as a *product*, the behavioural model, can facilitate the achievement of technical outcomes in learners. These outcomes are often unpredictable and, therefore, cannot be specified beforehand, which raises the problem of measurability (Sheehan, 1986; Grundy, 1987; Smith, 1996, 2000; Kelly, 2004).

Establishing a conceptual framework that best suits the theoretical underpinnings of the study based on the research objectives a working definition of the term 'curriculum' is given as a *praxis*. Considering that the study seeks an exploration of curriculum change and development in wider concerns of educational reforms (including macro, social, and political reforms), curriculum is defined as 'a praxis, a dynamic interplay of theoretical concepts and professional work within a critically reflective mind set' (Macpherson, 1994, p. 53). That is, within the context of this study, a broad and inclusive view of curriculum is held, with the term 'curriculum' used to designate the total programme and the overall rationale for any educational institution (Kelly, 2004).

The term curriculum is approached as *praxis* in which planning, acting, and evaluating are all equally related and integrated in an active process (Grundy, 1987).

Additionally, curriculum as *praxis* is approached and understood in the light of the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum theory and practice. That is, curriculum is used to achieve a proper concurrence of theory and practice and to find a practical coherence in the implementation of thinking. Furthermore, as Kelly (2004) points out, 'there can be no effective curriculum development no matter how hard people try from outside the school to prompt it' (p. xiii). She suggests that by convincing teachers of the importance of developing a theoretical underpinning to their work, this might contribute to bridging the gap between the theory and the practice of education. Finally, approaching curriculum as *praxis* allows a social construction of a curriculum in real learning situations and with actual students rather than imaginary ones (Grundy, 1987, pp. 114-116). A curriculum, in this aspect, is likely to contain practical solutions to the oppression of students caused by both society and other undemocratically reformed curricula. Although the curriculum is also a *process* involving the interactions of teachers, learners, and knowledge, in this study, the *praxis* model suffices due to its practicality. The current study investigates EFL teachers' practices, attitudes, and challenges within the context of the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. This study is practical, thus necessitating the application of the practical *praxis* model.

According to Giroux (1999), a critical pedagogy should emphasise the importance of the development of multiple literacies. He further explains that social literacies formed should be critical, cultural, and functional. Therefore, the content provided in the curriculum should emphasise the need for cultural difference as well as the importance of freedom of communication across cultural, political, and social borders. In effect, the current study, which analyses teachers' attitudes and experience towards curriculum change and development at the Institute, has adopted the *praxis* model to expound on the factors required to develop a potential curriculum as far as English language teaching is concerned.

3.4 EFL Curriculum Development

Markee (1997) states that:

'curriculum guidelines lay out a programme's educational philosophy, specify purposes and course content, identify implementation constraints, and articulate assessment and

evaluation criteria. They also include banks of materials that teachers can modify to meet the negotiated needs of their learners' (p. 21).

Literature on curriculum development stresses the 'systemic' and 'reiterative' nature of the building up of a curriculum (Holliday, 1997; Breen, 2001; Alwan, 2006; Christison & Murray, 2014). That is, it involves the consideration of several processes, where in any decision made about one process is dependent on decisions made about the others and each process should pave the way for the following one in a cyclical and interrelated manner (Holliday, 1997; Breen, 2001). The term 'curriculum development' is adopted throughout the paper to refer to the inclusion of the many components of curriculum, such as planning, implementation, and on-going review. In line with this and from an EL perspective, Brown (1995) and Christison and Murray (2014) also emphasise the systemic and reiterative nature of language curriculum development. Brown (1995) defines it as an 'approach that views language teaching and language programme development as a dynamic system of interrelated elements' (p. ix). Similarly, for Christison and Murray (2014), curriculum development is seen as a 'reiterative, dynamic process, one that is constantly being planned, implemented and evaluated' (p. 4). According to Lovat and Smith (1995), curriculum is more than merely a set of definitions. It can best be conceived as a decision-making action that integrates both intention and the manner in which the intention becomes operationalized into classroom reality. This reality, however, must be negotiated and modified because of a range of contextual circumstances (p. 23).

Conceptualisation of curriculum development

Literature on language curriculum development also presents extensive explanations of the main processes of language curriculum development. Many theorists such as Christison and Murray (2014) (also, Colwill & Gallagher, 2007; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Troudi & Alwan, 2010) have focused on the processes involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating language programmes.

Troudi and Alwan (2010), for example, conducted an interpretive qualitative study on secondary school English Language teachers' perceptions of curriculum change in the United Arab of Emirates. The study involved an exploratory study in which the

researchers repeated recorded face-to face interviews and member-checking group interviews conducted with 16 female English language teachers from three secondary schools. According to Troudi and Alwan's (2010) findings, the teachers had contradictory affective reactions to curriculum change, depending on the stance from which they considered the subject. However, the teachers revealed more positive feelings towards the curriculum change with time as they became more familiar with the new curriculum. The findings also revealed that the teachers were demoralised regarding their negative perception of their role and involvement in curriculum change and development.

The process of curriculum development involves 'processes of articulating broad educational philosophies, language policies, conducting needs analysis, setting of goals and objectives' (also in Brown, 1995; Dublin & Olshtain, 2000, Richards, 2003). It also involves deciding on educational content, materials and methodological approaches. On the other hand, the process of curriculum implementation involves the procedures wherein the processes in the development level are transformed into pedagogical activities in the classroom (Christison & Murray, 2014). At this point, curriculum evaluation comes into play, which 'involves deciding whether the objectives and goals set at the development stage have been achieved or not' (Troudi & Alwan, 2010, p. 108).

Moreover, theorists present different models and frameworks of developing a language curriculum. Brown (1995), for example, presents a comprehensive, practical, and influential overview of the different stages and activities involved in developing and implementing an effective language programme. He discusses that the systemic design of language curriculum involves six main elements: (i) needs analysis/assessment; ii) goals and objectives; iii) testing; iv) materials; v) teaching and vi) programme evaluation. He also argues that one of the main purposes of these is to support teachers and help them to do the best throughout the processes of teaching (p. 179).

There are various points of similarity between the model presented by Brown (1995) and other models of curriculum design described in the literature, such as the models presented by Murdoch (1989), Graves (2000), and Nation and Macalister (2010). In

many cases, a considerable overlap between the parts and stages involved in these models is clearly manifest.

However, a difference might, at times, lie between some of the elements involved in developing these different models. One example of this is in comparing the models of curriculum design presented by Murdoch (1989), Graves (2000), and Nation and Macalister (2010). According to Nation and Macalister (2010), a significant overlap can be discerned between the elements of context analysis, needs analysis, principles and beliefs, goals, and developing materials of the three models. However, contrasting the three also reveals differences in their content and evaluation elements. In fact, the Murdoch model differs the most from the other two in that it is revealed to have some limitations and weaknesses, due to the lack of consideration given to lack of principles, monitoring and assessment, and evaluation (Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 137-8).

The following sections describe a model of the EL curriculum development process relating to the processes of curriculum planning, curriculum implementation, and curriculum evaluation as presented by Brown (1995) and Richards (2003). This model also focuses on two key factors; the starting point of the course and the type of path followed during the design process (Nation & Macalister, 2010). In this regard, the model is best viewed as a *process* that is systematic and reiterative in nature (Christison & Murray, 2014) where the true development could start at any stage of the process (needs analysis, materials writing, goals selection, etc. (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Equally any decision made about one process is dependent on decisions made about the others. Each process should pave the way for the following one in a cyclical and interrelated manner (Holliday, 1997; Breen, 2001). The model is also based on the procedures of turning the processes at the development level into pedagogical activities in the classroom, as explained by Christison and Murray (2014), and it draws on relevant theory and research. The following section is a synthesis of several models described in the literature.

3.4.1 Environmental/Contextual Analysis

The first component in curriculum development is the *environmental or contextual analysis*. Environmental analysis, as put forth by Tessmer (1990), or situational analysis, as described by Richards (2001), involves considering the factors of the situation that have an effect on decisions about the goals and objectives of the course in which it will be used. It also involves determining how the course should take account of the latter in terms of what to include and how to teach and assess it (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 14). These factors could be related to any 'administrative, financial, logistical, manpower, pedagogic, religious, cultural, personal, or other factors that might have an impact on the programme' (Brown, 1995, p. 40). They can also arise from the teachers, the learners, and/or the teaching and learning situation (Nation & Macalister, 2010). For this reason, in some models of curriculum development, environment analysis is included in needs analysis (Brown, 1995; Holliday, 1997; Richards, 2003).

3.4.1.1 Balancing learning needs and outcomes

The necessity of examining learning needs within a given context is often emphasised as a basic requirement of any curriculum development (Print, 1993; Richards, 2003). According to Nation and Macalister (2010), the importance of environment analysis lies in the fact that it ensures that the course will be 'suitable, practical, and realistic' (p. 5). Similarly, with regard to the environmental consideration, Holliday (1997), for instance, emphasises the importance of learning about contextual constraints by exploring the context in which an English language programme is planned to be introduced. He also states that 'the whole range of activities in English language education, from syllabus design to project management, needs to be led by a deeper understanding of the social forces acting on the classroom, which a culture-sensitive approach hopes to provide' (p. 195).

Meanwhile, according to Christison and Murray (2014): 'Curricula are context dependent, reflecting the needs of learners, institutional values and policies, and teachers' beliefs' (p.4). In Syria, it is the duty of the national government through its Ministry of Education to develop curricula for vocational training and education. The process of developing a curriculum in Syria involves the coming together as a committee of governmental institutions, representatives from the private sector, and

the chambers of commerce. Recently, much weight has been placed on the employers' needs, a direction which has contributed to some subjects specifically and the further establishment of certain specialisations. However, curriculum development in Syria cannot be viewed as democratic, due to the presence of autocratic tendencies. For example, there are certain members of the private sector who have special connections with the government, thereby compromising the flexibility of the process (Albirini, 2004).

Meanwhile, the national policy regulating the development of curricula in Syria seems to be that every curriculum's pedagogy and content must be in support of a doctrine wherein any infiltration into the students' minds must be beneficial to the ruling government. Both the content and the methodology development of curricula are to be under surveillance by the government to ensure that no student acquires 'unnecessary' knowledge other than that defined by the government. Teachers, on the other hand, are to abide by the government structures of teaching and are not allowed to teach anything outside the government-certified curriculum content.

Consequently, learning environments in Syria provide minimal opportunity for group discussions and direct questions to the teacher. The knowledge imparted in most cases is usually censored by the government, an act which undermines the democratic space of the teachers and the students. Because of this, there has been a call for reforms in the Syrian curricula to enhance space that would produce globally-acknowledged graduates that are capable of competing on the global platform. Although external pressure, especially from the West, has had some impact on the government national policy, the changes made have still been minimal.

3.4.1.2 Contextual factors and teachers' attitudes

The influence of contextual factors on teachers' attitudes in the Syrian context is explored by Jesry (2014). He investigates how personal and contextual factors can have an impact upon teachers' attitudes and practices in their classrooms, thereby identifying three main in-practice factors: the wider educational system, the educational institution as a workplace, and the classroom. In these settings, he finds that newly-qualified teachers at the beginning of their careers encounter a wide

range of difficulties and challenges and show varied responses to both macro- and micro-level sets of contextual factors within their educational institutions and classrooms. In line with Jesry's (2014) study, contextual analysis is also a key factor in analysing the teaching practices and methods, and the challenges faced in the EL curriculum in Syria.

3.4.2 Needs Analysis

Needs analysis or assessment could be defined as:

'the systematic collection and analysis of all *subjective* and *objective* information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of the students within the context of the particular institutions involved in the learning situation' (Brown, 1995, p. 36) [*emphases added*].

For Christison and Murray (2014), subjective information includes details about the learners' own needs and desires from a language course, while objective information is based on collecting biographic background details about learners (p.56). Language learning needs analysis is seen as an essential element forming a rational basis for all the other elements of a systematic language curriculum development (Brown, 1995, p. 21) in the specific context of the learners (Christison & Murray, 2014). Consequently, needs analysis in this context would be important in determining the teaching practices used by the Institutes, as they should be the ones most familiar with the needs of the students.

Needs analysis can be conducted at any stage of the language programme. It can be conducted before the programme begins or in its initial stages, during the running programme, or at the end of the programme, particularly if it is to be repeated with different learners (Richards, 2003; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Due to the fact that needs are not always clear and are always changing, Nation and Macalister (2010, p.30) recommend looking at these needs from different perspectives and at a variety of times to result in a good needs analysis. They also note that the perspective can vary according to the type of need; the source of information; the tools for data-gathering; and the type of information collected (e.g. learning goals, preferred styles of learning, etc.). The consideration of a wide range of perspectives and different viewpoints when looking at needs analysis also falls in line with Benesch's (1996) call for a critical approach to needs analysis. She points out that needs analysis is a

political and subjective process affected by the ideology of those in control of the analysis. In other words, during the process, analysts are inevitably influenced by their attitudes to change the status quo (p. 736).

3.4.2.1 Stakeholders in needs analysis

The stakeholders involved in needs analysis are divided into four main categories: the target group, the audience, the needs analysts themselves, and the resource group (Brown, 1995, p. 37). Various needs analysis tools and procedures can be used to collect a wide variety of information and to analyse needs, the most common of which are interviews, questionnaires, observations, tests, and language text and discourse analysis (Brown, 1995; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Although the process of needs analysis has been criticised in that its results tend to be affected by the ideology of analysts regardless of the approach taken in conducting the analysis (Benesch, 1996), the results of needs analysis are still considered paramount for numerous reasons. First, it is considered as a basic requirement for ensuring that a course will be relevant and satisfying to the learners (Nation & Macalister, 2010), also helping to avoid dissatisfaction due to materials that have been developed to fit all learners (Long, 2005). Second, it helps in understanding the weaknesses and strengths of an existing curriculum, which are to be considered when developing a new one (Dubin & Olshtain, 2000). Third, it assists to uncover the learners' identities, experiences, and goals in their specific learning context (Christison & Murray, 2014). Finally, it helps teachers to provide their students with the specific language they need by identifying elements of students' target language situations and using them as a basis of instruction (Johns, 1991). In the context of the study, the target group and the audience are the students and teachers because, as discussed, needs analysts should be involved in the process, as this would help in determining the teaching practices to be used in the classrooms.

Jackson (2005) notes that the process of needs analysis also involves a thorough evaluation of the EFL curriculum, with a view to ensuring that the current and future needs of the learners are identified and well-addressed. Towards this goal, the

assessment of the needs should be done from myriad perspectives to further facilitate that all the people that are directly and indirectly affected by the curriculum are involved. Auerbach (1995) asserts that despite the important role of the analysis of learners' needs in the process of curriculum development, it should not only be considered the only source of information. As such, the needs analysis process goes beyond the learners' needs, wishes, and expectations of the learning process. The person conducting the needs analysis must also identify the expectations of other parties aside from the student, such as the EFL teachers, the financiers of the EFL programme, administrators, tutors, and the family of the EFL student. Former students can also make recommendations for improvement. Everyone has a role to play in the needs analysis process. Surveying the performance of former EFL students can help in identifying the weaknesses and strengths of the previous curriculum, which can be rectified and applied in any new curriculum. The teachers, meanwhile, are the ones who deliver the knowledge; and they can learn from the teaching methods recommended in any previous curricula.

3.4.2.2 Needs analysis and materials evaluation

Another area for scrutiny requiring a comprehensive needs analysis lies with the materials, namely the textbooks that the EFL students read. These texts can often determine how much knowledge a student will obtain from an EFL class. The English textbook sets the foundation for the lesson content and the exercises in which students can engage in order to expand their understanding of the classwork. In other learning environments, the English textbook is a major complement to the instructions given by the teacher. Aside from being a key guide for the students, a textbook can also be a vital tool for the teacher training process. The mere fact that the textbook contributes to teacher and student training makes it a catalyst for educational innovation. This is because just by studying the examples presented in the textbooks, teachers can be inspired by new ideas leading to the development of new knowledge and understanding. The active needs analysis of any textbook is a vital and fundamental process for publishers to be made aware of the content that the students and teachers will need during the learning process.

Any needs analysis can be evaluated according to its reliability, validity and practicality (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.30). Nation and Macalister (2010) explain that reliable needs analysis involves using carefully planned, standardised tools that are applied systematically. Valid needs analysis involves the consideration of the type of need and what information is relevant and important. In addition, practical needs analysis involves the consideration of issues of time, money, clarity, and being easy to understand, as well as the potential for incorporating it into the curriculum development process.

Because of the requirement to consider all the concerned parties and the elements, the process used to conduct the needs analysis is often formal and time-consuming. However, to make the process more efficient, it can be focused on particular points. Brown (1995) states, 'the process of needs analysis can generate a tremendous amount of information that must be sorted and utilized in some way within the curriculum. One way to use this information is to apply what has been learned in the needs analysis for the formation of programme goals and objectives' (p. 71). This is discussed further in the next section.

3.4.3 Defining goals and objectives

One way of formulating the language programme's goals and objectives is by considering the results that have been gathered from needs analysis and transforming them into useful statements that describe the programme's purposes (Brown, 1995; Dubin & Olshtain, 2000). Goals and objectives should be *measurable* in order to determine the extent to which the students have learned what they are supposed to learn, as stated in the curriculum's original goals and objectives (Christison & Murray, 2014). Brown (1995) defines language programme goals as 'general statements concerning desirable and attainable programme purposes and aims based on perceived language and situation needs' (p.71). He posits that the process of goal-defining requires the curriculum designer to consider the programme's aims with specific reference to what the students are expected to be able to do by the time they leave the language programme. Therefore, the curriculum should be organised around the goals of the programme, which might be language and situation-centred goals, functional or structural goals, or goals related to feelings

and attitudes (*ibid*). Therefore, this current enquiry assesses the appropriateness and applicability of goals and objectives of the Syrian EL curriculum from the viewpoint of teachers at the Institute regarding the teaching materials and methods used.

Language programme instructional objectives, on the other hand, are defined as 'specific statements that describe the particular knowledge, behaviours, and/or skills that the learner will be expected to know or perform at the end of a course or programme' (Brown, 1995, p.73). Brown elaborates as follows:

The process of converting perceptions of students' needs into goals and objectives provides the basic units that can in turn be used to define and organize all teaching activities into cogent curriculum. Once objectives are in hand, the basic elements of the students' needs can be analysed, assessed, and classified to create a coherent teaching/learning experience. In short, objectives provide the building blocks from which curriculum can be created, moulded, and revised (1995, p.75).

Aims, goals and objectives are normally provided in the curriculum in a hierarchical form according to their degree of specificity and emphasis (Brown, 1995; Print, 1993). That is, according to Dubin and Olshtain (1986, 2000), if language learning has been influenced by the ideas of a particular philosophy of education, the major influence in shaping the course goals would be the process dimension rather than the language content or outcomes. On the other hand, when specific attainments are desired from the general goals stated during the process of shaping the curriculum, the emphasis should then be on the product and the outcomes. In other words, the objectives of a curriculum are linked to its goals and, thus, affect the language content and outcomes. The goals address general concerns of a language curriculum, whereas objectives are specific results of courses outlined in a syllabus. Goals guide materials development, while objectives serve as a guide for teachers and learners (Dubin & Olshtain, 2000).

As for the teachers' role in this process, Alwan (2006) stresses the importance of their participation and contribution in setting the language curriculum intents through continuous revisions of the programme's goals and objectives. She sheds light on the difficulty of effectively making such contributions in language curricula that are centrally-developed, particularly in state schools (p. 201). This is in line with Elliott's (1994) emphasis that the language curriculum should not be driven by a set of

objectives. Instead, these objectives should be illuminative, accommodating more teacher input on the basis of learners' needs.

3.4.4 Content, materials, and curriculum design

Making sensible and well-justified decisions about content is one of the most important parts of curriculum design (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 71). According to Nation and Macalister (2010), choices about the course content have to be made regarding the units for planning and checking the course, which might be within different areas based on the focus of the goals of the language lesson (i.e. language, ideas, skills, or text). The goals can be broken down into smaller well-specified objectives for the various strands or skill subdivisions of a course, a procedure which is useful for monitoring and assessing learners' progress (for example, Brown, 1995).

Long and Crookes (1993) acknowledge that the starting points of curriculum design should be from the choice of the units of analysis (pp. 9-19). The 'units of analysis,' are also called 'units of progression' (Nation & Macalister, 2010). In a course these are the items that are used to grade the progress of the course. That is, as explained by Nation and Macalister (2010), 'if the starting point of a course was topics, then the units of progression would also be topics with progress through the course being marked by an increased number of topics being covered' (p.71). However, it is important to make sure that other units are not wholly overlooked in the materials and that they are used at an appropriate level. Nation and Macalister (2010) classify the 'units of progression' into two types: a type that progress in a definite series, such as vocabulary or grammar levels, and a type that represent a field of knowledge which could be covered in any order, such as topics. They argue that the order of items within a course is determined by pedagogical considerations and that it is important to be aware of the big gap between progress which refers to learning, and progression which refers to how the course moves forward (pp. 71-2).

Good curriculum design involves the checking of courses against a range of types of content. It involves the decisions regarding the selection and sequencing of the units of progression in a course. This sequencing may be approached using a variety

of formats. The following table details five such sequencing formats, taken from the literature:

Source	Format	Sequencing Details
Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 82-5)	Linear	The material in one lesson depends on the learning that has occurred in the previous lesson. It starts with simple items that prepare the learner for progressively more complex ones in the following lessons.
	Modular	It is applicable when lessons are independent of each other, allowing for better flexibility in arranging the lessons in any order needed. It considers each unit as complete by itself and does not usually assume knowledge of previous modules.
Dubin and Olshtain (2000, p. 55-62)	Cyclical	It involves working with the same topic repeatedly, but with a graduation of the complexity and difficulty of the topic.
	Matrix	It is very flexible in that it involves the selection of topics from a table of content in a random order.
	Story-line	It is the adoption of a narrative form, which can be used concurrently with other formats

Table. 3.1 Sequencing of the units of progression in a course, as detailed in the literature.

According to Nation and Macalister (2010), these can be approached in two major formats, *linear* or *modular*. The *linear* way of arrangement means that the material in one lesson depends on the learning which has occurred in the previous lesson. It starts with simple items that prepare for more complex ones in the following lessons. The *modular* way of arrangement depends on whether each lesson is separate from the other, giving flexibility for arranging the lessons in any order needed. In this approach to sequencing, each unit is considered as complete by itself and does not usually assume knowledge of previous modules (*ibid*, pp. 82-5).

In addition to the linear and modular formats for approaching sequencing of units in a course, Dubin and Olshtain (2000) discuss three other formats, the cyclical, matrix, and story-line. The cyclical format involves working with the same topic more than once but with a graduation of the complexity and difficulty of the topic. The matrix format involves more flexibility of selecting topics from a table of content in a random

order. Finally, the story-line format involves taking a narrative form that can be used in line with other formats (*ibid*, pp. 55-62).

3.4.5 Presentation and teaching

Teaching is one of the most crucial elements in the process of curriculum design. It is at this stage that the data gathered from the previous elements come together in the form of activities that involve learners and which are implemented by teachers (Brown, 1995; Nation & Macalister, 2010). The issues of teachers' development and curriculum development, therefore, become interconnected (Bailey, 2000) in a way which assures that a curriculum is implemented as designed, such that it achieves its goals and objectives (Brown, 1995; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Following this train of thought, it has been suggested that the adoption of a new curriculum necessitates the adoption of new teaching approaches, thus requiring training support for the teachers (Alwan, 2006).

In this regard, Brown (1995) discusses four ways that can promote sound teaching practices and help teachers to improve the quality of their teaching within a language programme through its curriculum: i) orientating and involving teachers in the new curriculum; ii) supporting their teaching efforts; iii) monitoring the quality of instruction, and iv) providing ways for teachers to revitalise themselves (pp. 179-212). Moreover, although having good teachers can facilitate the implementation of a new curriculum, 'quality teaching is achieved not only as a consequence of how well teachers teach but through creating contexts and work environments that can facilitate good teaching' (Richards, 2003, p.198).

3.4.6 Evaluation

The process of curriculum evaluation can be viewed as an essential group of activities performed by curriculum developers and implementers, which enable the latter to gather data to either judge the individual achievements of those experiencing the curriculum (assessment) or curricular programmes in general (evaluation). That is, this process of evaluation will then facilitate the decisions to either 'accept, change, or eliminate something, the curriculum in general or an educational textbook in particular' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1997, p. 319-320). The assessment of individual

achievements is seen as part of the overall process of curriculum evaluation, as the data gathered can be used to guide 'decisions regarding content topics, organisation of content, teaching methods, and even the physical organisation of the class' (*ibid*). In the same vein, Norrie *et al* (2009) stress that, in order for a curriculum evaluation to be effective and play an informative role in any future decisions regarding the language programme, it should consider the context of the language programme and not be imposed from another context beyond. The authors elaborate as follows, 'evaluation methods must be designed with maximal articulation and 'situatedness' vis-à-vis the actual language educational milieu, and the specific program[me]s and stakeholders within it' (p. 8-9). Evaluation is then 'the heart of the systematic approach to language curriculum design' (Brown, 1995, p.217). It is with such an understanding of curriculum evaluation that the study attempts to explore current Syrian EFL teachers' attitudes regarding curriculum evaluation and how they view the effectiveness of the teaching materials and methods at the Higher Institute of Languages.

The practice of periodically evaluating and revising existing curricula is widely acknowledged to ensure that the needs of learners are adequately addressed (Kırkgöz, 2009). Evaluation is considered as 'the part of the model that includes, connects, and gives meaning to all the other elements' (*ibid*). Evaluation must be considered during the whole process of curriculum development as well as after a period of implementing the new curriculum (Alderson, 1992). In this regard, Alderson (1992) also highlights the importance of ensuring that the evaluation is planned as a single process. He notes that an unused evaluation is a waste of time for all concerned, and that everyone involved in the planning should be responsible for what he refers to the evaluation jargon as calling 'utilization' (*ibid*: p.20).

According to Ornstein & Hunkins (1997, p. 320), curriculum evaluation 'focuses on discovering whether the curriculum as designed, developed, and implemented is producing or can produce the desired results. Evaluation identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum before implementation and the effectiveness of its delivery after implementation.' Hence, one aspect of 'evaluation' could be defined as the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information that is needed for a

curriculum *improvement* (e.g. Cronbach, 1985; Richards *et al.*, 1985; Brown, 1995). This has been traditionally referred to as 'formative evaluation'. It is formative in that it has the purpose of forming or reshaping a course in order to *improve* it (Nation & Macalister, 2010). It usually takes place during the on-going curriculum development process (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2003). On the other hand, evaluation also involves *assessing the effectiveness* of the curriculum within a particular educational context (White, 1985; Brown, 1995; Nation & Macalister, 2010) and the planning and running of a course (Nation & Macalister, 2010). This has been typically referred to as 'summative evaluation' (Scriven, 1967; Richards, 2003). According to Nation and Macalister (2010), a summative evaluation has the purpose of making a 'summary or judgment on the quality or adequacy of the course so that it can be compared with other courses, compared with previous summative evaluations, or judged as being up to a certain criterion or not' (pp. 125-126). Summative evaluation usually takes place at the end of a programme (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2003).

In addition to the formative and summative evaluation, however, Stenhouse (1975) also stresses the importance of having 'illuminative evaluation' to help those involved in the new programme understand what is going on during that programme. It refers to evaluation that seeks a deeper understanding of how different aspects of the programme work or are being implemented (Richards, 2003, p.289). In illuminative evaluation, the teachers are considered as active evaluators who help to achieve a better understanding of the teaching and learning processes in the programme (*ibid*). It involves the participants to be the judges of their own actions (Grundy, 1987, p. 77).

Finally, as Brown (1995) states, 'the process of curriculum development is never finished' (p.217). Therefore, since the data is based on the attitudes and experiences of teachers of English as a foreign language, this study employs a teacher-led evaluation of the current ELT materials and provides recommendations, as well as endorsing those provided by the teachers, for the improvement of the ELT curriculum in the Syrian context.

The following section provides a detailed review of the literature dealing with the concept of change in curriculum, exploring it from different perspectives, proceeded by an overview of the concept of educational change.

3.5 Curriculum Change

3.5.1 Educational change and reform

A wide range of concepts are used to refer to the notion of change in education, such as educational reforms or educational innovations. Whereas the former is used to refer to large-scale changes of a national curriculum or to methods or formats of high-stakes assessment, the latter is used to refer to formal changes at national, regional, or institutional levels and the implementation of which has seemingly been fully thought-through and planned (Wedell, 2009). In this study, the term 'change' is used to refer to all alternations or modifications to the procedure or the content of the language education provision. Educational change, specifically, is used herein to refer to any on-going process that affects any aspect(s) of an educational system with or without an introduction of something different or new to the language education provision.

For many governments worldwide, education is often considered to be one of the most important factors in shaping the future of the country and, thus, it may be seen as an arena for continuous change. The earliest efforts of educational change, as stated by Hargreaves (2009), were most evident in England and to some extent in Australia and New Zealand in the early 1990s. However, and because educational systems are continually subject to further change due to social and systemic influences, educational change and reform strategies and their accompanying research directions have become bigger, tighter, harder, and flatter after about a decade (*ibid*).

Change in education may take place in different ways. According to Huberman (1973), for example, change may be either in 'hardware', 'software', or in a subcategory of software: 'interpersonal relations'. The first, a change in 'hardware', is used to refer to any additions to school equipment, such as new classrooms, teaching machines, books, or playgrounds; the second, a change in 'software', is

used to refer to any change or reform in the content and range of the curriculum, or in the methods of delivery and reception. Finally, the phrase 'interpersonal relations' is used to refer to changes in the roles and relationships between teachers and students, between teachers and administrators, and/ or between teachers and teachers (Huberman, 1973 in Kasapoglu, 2010, p. 10). In addition to these three changes, a change in education may also include changes in policy goals, curriculum design and implementation, assessment techniques, administrative issues, leadership, classroom practices, instructional technologies and resources, and teacher capacities (Towndrow, Silver & Albright, 2009).

Though reasons behind an educational change might vary from one educational context to another, a common denominator of educational policy-making is that of standard improvement (Harris, 2009). Hunter and Benson (1997) argue that educational change is considered necessary to support desirable changes for the improvement and development of other wider aspects of a society as a whole (*ibid*: p. 96). In this regard, Wedell (2009) explains that educational change is needed to keep learners' knowledge up-to-date and linked to the technological and economic effects of globalisation, and thus to enable the nation to cope with the other external changes taking place worldwide (pp. 14-15). Another reason behind deciding on educational change is, according to Wedell (2009), to make the educational system more strictly standardised and measured and, thus, more clearly accountable for the funding it receives, especially in some parts of the English-speaking countries and since the 1980s. For others, educational change is desired to increase equal opportunities between learners within the same society, as it helps to reduce the gap between low- and high-achieving schools by having clear and equal standards in all schools. That is, having such clear standards will help to create, following Caldwell (2004), 'significant, systematic and sustained change that leads to dramatic improvements in learning for all students in all settings' (p.423).

It is apparent that having successful outcomes is generally the hope when taking any eventual steps towards educational reforms or change. However, in many cases of these reform attempts, the results have had undesired consequences. Fullan (2001) speculates that the reason behind change failure might be attributed to the

policy-makers' lack of consideration towards the people who are going to implement the change. He points out that 'many attempts at policy and programme change have concentrated on product development, legislation and other on-paper changes in a way that ignored the fact that what people did or did not do was the crucial variable' (*ibid*, p. 70).

Fullan (2007), in this respect, highlights the importance of having a degree of what he refers to as a 'recapturing' of the people who are most closely involved in an educational change. That is, they must adjust their own understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the process of educational change in the light of their professional experiences, classroom behaviours, and beliefs. Policy-makers and educational leaders, consequently, are expected to 'try to understand what this expectation might mean to people and how they might react' (Wedell, 2009, p.18). As for the time needed for the successful implementation of an educational change, most researchers (e.g. Fullan, 2001; Berend, 2007; & Wedell, 2009) agree that it is very difficult to judge how long an educational change requires, since it might differ from one context to another. Wedell makes the claim that, 'the more ambitious and demanding the change is.....the longer it will take' (2009, p. 17).

3.5.2 The concept of curriculum change

Curriculum change has been investigated in depth in various studies for many decades. Its impact on society as a whole has been addressed from many different perspectives: e.g. socio-political, economical, educational and technological aspects. Curriculum change is often viewed as a subset of educational change (Lovat & Smith, 2003). Such a change is essential, in a sense that it provides individuals in society with a set of knowledge, skills, perceptions, and beliefs about the on-going cycle of development over time. The decisions for curriculum change are often top-down and come because of either a change in the political scene (e. g. a change in the political leader), a change in the orientations of pedagogy (e. g. a change from a grammar translation approach to a communicative approach in English language teaching), or a change in national priorities (Christison & Murray, 2014).

Looking further back in the past, curriculum change had been defined as a matter of discovering and applying better procedures for enhanced learning experiences for students (Banning, 1954). It was also believed that curriculum change implies the introduction of one or more different or new components to the curriculum (Everard & Morries, 1996; Markee, 1997, Alwan, 2006). In this regard, Lachiver and Tardif (2002) propose five main steps in the process of curriculum change: (1) an analysis of the existing offerings and context; (2) the expression of key programme goals and objectives in a mission statement; (3) the prioritisation of resources and development strategies; (4) the implementation of the targeted curricula change, and (5) the establishment of assessment tools and processes. The issue of what constitutes curriculum change has been thoroughly investigated in literature and many principles conceptualising the need for a curriculum change have been put forward (e.g. Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005; Sahlberg, 2005; Kasapoglu, 2010). Kasapoglu (2010), in this respect, has summarised these into seven main principles, as follows.

Firstly, understand the main underlying reasons and need for curriculum change in order to investigate the associated political, social, and economical foundations. This is for raising the quality and filling the gap in the students' achievements. Secondly, appreciate the complexity and internal dynamics of the process of change in order to sustain any implementation of change in the curriculum. The implementation process can be perceived as being difficult as it requires stakeholders at the top of institutions to be more reflexive about all aspects of change. Thirdly, take actions, make policies and determine strategies that have the principal aim of increasing the collective power of people charged with implementing curriculum change. Fourthly, develop 'professional learning communities' within the educational institutions targeted for change, along with using other institutional and teaching success stories with curriculum as models from which to learn. Fifthly, collect and analyse data directly from learners to improve understanding about the learners' needs. Action plans for curriculum change should be prepared, based on an evaluation of such data. Sixthly, develop leadership and guidance for curriculum change within the relevant context. Finally, utilise existing ideas in a learning context for cultivating

better teaching practices and helping students learn (Adapted from Kasapoglu, 2010, pp. 12-13).

3.5.3 Curriculum innovation

Literature highlights the important role teachers play in curriculum change and development. Teachers' involvement has provided a key area for investigation in more recent studies and has been the main focus of many curriculum studies and associated literature (Lamie, 2005; Fullan, 2007; Smith & Southerland, 2007; Carl, 2009; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Troudi & Alwan, 2010). Some of these research projects focus on curriculum *innovation*, a component of change which concerns curriculum development and influences teacher's attitudes. Curriculum innovation could be defined as 'a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching (and/or testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters' (Markee, 1997, p. 46). Hence, curriculum change and curriculum innovation can be viewed as two interconnected terms, since both of them refer to introducing 'some element of curriculum which is new to the context' (Alwan, 2006, p. 51). Equally, some literature shows that an effective and innovative curriculum is greatly dependent upon the behaviour and attitudes of the teachers who are implementing that curriculum (e.g. Young & Lee, 1984).

In the light of this argument, Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991) point out that legislators and administrators often misunderstand teachers' perspectives on change, because they tend to make too many assumptions about the teachers and their ways of thinking in the process of innovation implementation. The researchers argue that, frequently, the application of classroom innovation does not necessarily tally with teachers' own assessment of their intrinsic value and desirability. According to some teachers, these innovations are often not transferable into the daily realities of classrooms. This could be due to the fact that legislators and administrators assume conditions that are different from those actually faced by teachers. This is similar to the argument put forward by Fullan (2001) discussed in the previous section.

On the other hand, Beeby (1973) also stresses that a number of other teacher-centric limitations could be considered as serious obstacles to curriculum innovation. He highlights, for instance, restrictions upon the capacity of ill-prepared teachers to adapt to changes in the curriculum. These could include a lack of teacher education, compounded by a lack of clear goals in the education system, which might affect teachers' thinking. Similarly, successful innovation could be hindered by a lack of understanding and acceptance of the innovations on behalf of the teachers. Equally, teachers as products of the system might not necessarily be prone or open to innovation. This is in addition to teachers' possible isolation, which in many cases can slow down the impetus for innovation. The final influencing factor might also be due to the instance of widely different abilities among teachers to actually take part in innovation.

In the same vein, Nicholls (1983) draws attention to the fact that innovation always involves a change in both teachers' attitudes and their practices. Consequently, if the innovation does not coincide with the teachers' existing attitudes, resistance to change is more likely to occur (Brown & McIntyre, 1987). However, Fullan (2001) argues that teachers' perceived negativity does not necessarily mean that they are resistant to change but, rather, simply that they do not know how to handle the change or are uncertain of what is expected of them. He states that, 'it is that people resist change as much as they don't know how to cope with it. If we know one thing about innovation and reform, it is that it cannot be done successfully to others' (*ibid*: p: xiv). At times, innovation is even seen as a challenge to a teacher's existing teaching skills and beliefs (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Markee, 1997). Possibly as a result, literature on curriculum innovation in education indicates an apparent discrepancy between the intended curriculum and the one implemented by teachers. Therefore, simply introducing a change to a curriculum may not necessarily ensure that it will be implemented by those affected by it (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

The Syrian ELT curriculum has already undergone a few changes since 2000, the latest having been implemented as recently as 2009. However, the government, through the Ministry of Education, has seen the necessity of implementing a new change, with a view to making the Syrians embrace and come in line with the

processes of globalisation and information technology issues. Therefore, the concept of curriculum change must be investigated in this specific context.

3.5.4 Curriculum implementation: intentions and realities

As discussed in the previous section, differences exist between the intentions of the curriculum and the manner in which this curriculum is implemented. These have been highlighted in considerable studies in educational research (O'Sullivan, 2004; Lamie, 2005; Smith & Southerland, 2007; Orafi & Borg, 2009). Lamie (2005), in a study conducted on Japanese EFL teachers' attitudes to educational changes, discovered that, while teachers might express some satisfaction in their attitudes to change, this might not be reflected in their actual teaching practices. According to Lamie's study, teachers' willingness or resistance to change can be attributed to a number of factors, such as institutional and cultural beliefs, community and local pressures, and the students' achievements and feedback. Likewise, Orafi and Borg (2009) studied the relationship between the intended ELT curriculum and the teachers' actual practices in the classroom by examining three teachers' implementation of a new communicative English language curriculum in Libyan secondary schools. According to the findings, these teachers gave evidence of the ways in which their prior beliefs about language teaching and learning interacted with elements of their educational context to filter the planned curriculum in articulating the bases of their teaching. The manner in which the teachers implemented the curriculum, therefore, 'reflected their views of what was feasible in the light of their understandings of themselves as teachers, of their students, and of the demands of the system more generally' (Orafi & Borg, 2009, p. 243).

Similarly, this possible mismatch between the principles underlying the curricula and teachers' beliefs is highlighted in the literature on curriculum innovation in education, generally, and ELT, specifically (Levitt, 2001; Breen, 2001). According to Levitt (2001), a gap can develop between the intended and the implemented principles of reform teachers' beliefs do not harmonise with the philosophy of science education reform, which may then hinder a necessary change. Hence, Breen (2001) posit that in ELT 'any innovation in classroom practice from the adoption of a new technique

or textbook to the implementation of a new curriculum has to be accommodated within the teacher's own framework of teaching principles' (p, 472).

3.5.5 Involving and training teachers

Following this view, Finch (1981) argues that involving teachers in the process of curriculum development may create a more concrete link between the intended curriculum and the taught curriculum. She found teachers, however in many cases do not always welcome such an involvement in curriculum development or change because they are not necessarily trained to think of themselves as part of the curriculum. They need to be encouraged to get involved and take up their roles as change agents (Holt, 1986), or else they may be unable to deal with a new up-to-date curriculum, which requires the adoption of modern ways and strategies of teaching. To many teachers, therefore, 'curriculum change' is just a term meaning, 'a new set of syllabus documents and teaching materials' (Alwan, 2006).

In addition, Young (1979) explains that, 'teachers' involvement in curriculum decision making is feasible at school level but difficult at district level when considering teachers' daily obligations [and the way in which] the organisation shapes the teachers' perceptions of their professional duties' (Young, 1979 in Troudi & Alwan, 2010, p. 109). This coincides with Golby's (1985) findings, which conclude that, with curriculum changes, teachers experienced increased workloads, as well as anxiety over areas of teaching, with which many were unfamiliar or lacked confidence in.

Such obstacles have been discussed in detail in previous sections. Most notably, these include the factors affecting teachers' resistance to change, identified by Lamie (2005), such as institutional and cultural beliefs, community and local pressures, and the student outcomes. These continue to remain some of the key issues which educators need to address when discussing curriculum change.

As such, Ekiz (2003) suggests that there cannot be any meaningful curriculum implementation without teacher professionalism, since there is a close relationship between the two. To address these concerns, some professional programmes have been developed aiming at improving education and student learning, as well. Such programmes are systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices

of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students (Guskey, 2002). The professional development programmes are designed to help teachers meet the high expectations of the proposed new materials.

In light of this argument, Davis and Krajcik suggest designing 'educative curriculum materials' where the word 'educative' refers to teachers as well as learners. They suggest this to help to promote 'teachers' knowledge in specific instances of instructional decision-making but also help them to develop more general knowledge that they can apply flexibly in new situations' (2005, p. 3). Brown (1995), similarly, discusses four ways that a language, through its curriculum, can help teachers to do their jobs: orientating and involving teachers to the new curriculum, supporting teachers and their teaching efforts, monitoring instruction, and providing ways and a framework for teachers to refresh themselves (p. 179).

In their study, Orafi and Borg (2009) also recommend that the new curricula should be designed with a mind to assessing the gap in practices and beliefs and to 'use this analysis to inform the support systems which will be necessary to facilitate curriculum implementation' (p. 252). Likewise, other researchers state that training can alter beliefs which are related to pedagogy, on the condition that they are consciously challenged (Korthagen & Lagerwerf, 1996; Tillema, 1997a, 1997b & 1998; Von Wright, 1997).

However, for other researchers, teachers' attitudes are hard to control or influence (Nespor, 1987). Programmes for re-training teachers are, consequently, unlikely to succeed unless they can bring about a change in teachers' attitudes towards the nature of learning and their own role in that process (Young & Lee, 1987, Johnson, 1999). Nevertheless, this is difficult to achieve since old attitudes are, by definition, deeply embedded and difficult to remove (Pajares, 1996). Thus, the process of re-training in itself should also be given proper attention.

Carl (2009), therefore, stresses the importance of considering the teachers' subjective realities instead of ignoring them, to guarantee optimal teacher involvement and to avoid their resistance to change (p. 200). Teachers' attitudes are dependent on the groups in which they operate. In addition, curriculum change is a

social process that requires the cooperation of all relevant stakeholders. Since teachers form a part of the society responsible for curriculum development and change, their attitudes towards the process of establishing, developing, and implementing these curricula must ultimately affect the curricula's success. Teachers may develop an attitude towards a curriculum based on the societal influence of the same. In this case, society's attitude towards the curriculum may be reflected in the manner with which the teacher implements it (Banning, 1954). A negative attitude by society towards a curriculum may imply, in most cases, that the teachers could develop negative attitudes regarding it, thereby making its implementation difficult.

The literature reviewed in this section has revealed the significance of involving teachers, i.e. those who are expected to implement the change, in curriculum development in order to ensure that their teaching practices in the classrooms match those required by the new curriculum. The teachers' voice and ownership of any curriculum change is believed to provide the key to understanding the continuing problem of the transformation of innovative ideas from conception to implementation (e.g. Kirk & Macdonald, 2001). The following section reviews the literature concerning how teachers' attitudes towards curriculum development and change might contribute to their understanding and willingness to implement curriculum change and development.

To summarise, it has been observed that teachers' attitudes concerning instruction and other educational dimensions can play a vital role in the success of each pedagogical change, especially in a change as radical as a national curricular reform (Kasapoglu, 2010). Furthermore, the literature reviewed shows the possible impact well-informed and qualified teachers might have on the process of introducing new elements of change to a curriculum. In addition, the discussion shows how teachers' perceptions of the main goal of a reform are important because how this influences their motivation to change their own professional practices and achieve the goals of the proposed reform (Kalin *et al.*, 2007). Thus, the enquiry analyses the teachers' experience and attitudes towards curriculum change and development at the English Language Teaching Department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages.

3.5.6 Teachers attitudes toward change

It has been recognised that teachers' attitudes have considerable influence on the interpretation of any kind of change (Newstorm & Davis, 1997). Studying teachers' attitudes therefore has the potential to provide significant and profound insight into many aspects of the teacher's professional world. Pajares (1996), for example, points out that attention to teachers' beliefs can inform educational practice in fundamental ways and is essential to improving their professional preparation and teaching practices. He also asserts that personal perceptions are one of the best indicators of the decisions made by individuals over the course of their lifetime. Kagan also states that the study of beliefs is critical to educational practice and that beliefs may be considered as 'the clearest measure of a teacher's professional growth' (1992: p. 85). Moreover, for Pintrich (1990), beliefs can often show themselves to be amongst some of the most valuable psychological constructs for teacher education (Pintrich, 1990 in Gahin, 2001).

Terms such as 'teachers' attitudes', 'teachers' perceptions', 'teachers' beliefs', 'teachers' feelings', 'teachers' values' and 'teachers' interpretations' are often used interchangeably (e. g. Beck *et al.*, 2000; Ben-Peretz *et al.*, 2003; Campbell *et al.*, 2001; Collinson & Cook, 2000; Dreyfus & Mazouz, 1989; Freeman, 2002; Gibbs *et al.*, 1999; Lazaraton, 2003 in Alwan, 2006) to refer to what people think, feel, or do within an educational context (Kasapoglu, 2010). In this study, the above terms will be used interchangeably, particularly 'teacher's attitudes', to refer to 'teachers' constructions of reality' (Alwan, p.45) in areas related to educational settings.

It is often believed that attitudes toward change, in general, are usually indicative of a person's working knowledge about change, a person's affective reactions to change, and his/her behavioural tendency toward that change. Thus, classroom teachers' attitudes toward curriculum change, for instance, might include teachers' practical knowledge of curriculum change, their affective reactions to curriculum change, and their behavioural tendencies toward curriculum change (Kasapoglu, 2010).

In this regard, Kasapoglu (2010) conducted an empirical study on the relationship between classroom teachers' attitudes toward change, their perceptions of constructivist curriculum change, and the implementation of constructivist teaching and learning activities in a primary school in Turkey. She argues that, when teachers' attitudes towards curriculum change are considered, there is a possibility that teachers may take preventive actions and employ the right decisions about determining, planning, implementing, and evaluating any type of change, especially if such attitudes at all levels of implementation are clearly identified by the teachers themselves. It is in this light that teachers may either be willing to accept or resist that change (Kasapoglu, 2010, p.19). This is also argued by Benveniste and McEwan (2000), who suggest that the adoption of educational changes, such as new pedagogies, might be accounted for by teachers' willingness (motivation and commitment) to change. Guhn (2009), on the other hand, defines resistance to change as a human tendency that is easily understood since change typically requires new competencies and can lead to undesirable outcomes.

3.5.7 Teachers' beliefs and feelings

In line with this argument, and based on her study of sixteen female EL teachers' perceptions of curriculum change in three secondary schools in the UAE, Alwan (2006) refers to four significant findings in the area of teachers' perceptions concerning change. The first finding indicates that both beliefs and perceptions inform practice and influence decision-making with regard to the choice of teaching techniques. Thus, the classroom decisions that teachers make are based on their personal perceptions of teaching and of learning as well. Secondly, teachers' perceptions can be affected by various teaching contextual circumstances and equally their behaviour in the classroom behaviours may be affected by the image they have of themselves. Thirdly, the way in which perceptions are investigated and the underpinnings of the investigation methodology are also major determinants in this area. To this end, it has been observed that one of the best ways to understand teachers' perceptions is to make them reflect upon their own actions (Gatbonton, 1999; Johnson, 1999 in Alwan, 2006). Following Alwan (2006) the critical question of whether teacher training does indeed changes teacher perceptions or not, is discussed more in depth in the following section.

In the Syrian educational context specifically, Jesry (2014) has recommended the introduction of specific changes into the curricula of teacher education programmes at the Higher Institute of Languages. These are based on the findings of his study, in which he explores the process of learning to teach within the field of ELT, focusing on novice teachers in the first year of their teaching experience in private language centres in Syria. The findings of the study reveal the personal and contextual influences on teachers' practices in the classroom, which can be categorised into 'pre-practice' influences and 'in-practice' influences. The pre-practice influences inform the personal beliefs which teachers develop during their experiences prior to starting school. Jesry (2014) explains how these beliefs, which have a direct impact on the teachers' attitudes and practices in classroom, can be held consciously or even unconsciously. In this regard, Jesry (2014) explores how the teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions; shape their approaches and teaching philosophies, and guide their actions in the classroom. The study also highlights how teachers' existing beliefs act as 'filters' through which they interpret incidents, affecting their attitudes to change. Teachers' pre-entry beliefs, meanwhile, focus on affective, personal characteristics, such as 'the personal attributes of their past teachers and construct beliefs based on these attributes' (*ibid*, p. 71).

EL teachers' perceptions of change, in particular, have been explored by McGrail (2005), who focuses on the introduction of technology into the EL curriculum. In his study, McGrail explores the EL teachers' perspectives on attempts to affect change by the use of technology. McGrail draws attention to the problem wherein legislators, school board officials, and administrators can often assume that teachers will agree with their opinions, programmes, and policies. These policy-makers often attempt to change the very core of how teachers present materials without communicating with them and without consulting them concerning how to best make these changes happen. In addition, McGrail has discovered that teachers tend to develop attitudes about technology based on considerations of gains, dilemmas, and concerns regarding their own and their students' needs. The research concludes that it is necessary to heed the perspectives of the teachers as the primary stakeholders in

the process in order to realise any effective gains in the application of computer technology in the classroom.

McGrail (2005) explores English Language art teachers' perceptions of introducing technology in the classroom in Atlanta, USA, using qualitative methodology. Adopting a similar approach to the current study, the researcher used a collective case study, in which recorded interviews, with open-ended questions, were conducted with teachers, transcribed, and analysed inductively. According to McGrail's findings, the psychological effects of change were apparent in the participants' own perceptions of themselves. Some teachers were shown to feel unqualified, expressing their need for on-going training and support in the required skills. They had been given no choice in the area of curriculum development or change and were obligated to use the new technology in their instruction, highlighting the issue of powerlessness during top-down curriculum change. Another major finding here is that teachers can perceive that their most important responsibility is to ensure that students master the curriculum material. Understanding the rationale for change, moreover, facilitates willingness for its subsequent adoption for practice, as teachers seem to be cooperative when the reasons underpinning change were known to them.

In an attempt to influence teachers' attitudes, to help them to overcome their resistance to any kind of curricula change and to facilitate the motivation for such a change, teachers as the implementers of change were encouraged to consider the change as a need. This is especially in the following cases: i) when there is positive top-down pressure for the change (Battistich *et al.*, 1996; 2000 & Noblit *et al.*, 2001 in Guhn, 2009); ii) when good relationships are built among school staff or between school staff and parents, such that they are involved in decision-making (Comer, 2005 & Woodruff *et al.*, 1998 in Guhn, 2009); and finally, iv) when competences are increased for the successful accomplishment of change (Kasapoglu, 2010). There is a widely recognised view that the success of curriculum change is dependent upon the professional development of teachers (Blenkin, Edwards & Kelly, 1997 in Ekiz, 2003). That is, as mentioned previously, where there is a close relationship between

teacher professionalism and teachers' control over the curriculum (Helsby & McCulloch, 1996 in Ekiz, 2003).

Finally, one important aspect affecting teachers' attitudes in curriculum design is the role of their lived experiences and realities. Guskey (2002) maintains that, 'When teachers gain evidence, and see that a new programme or innovation works well in their classrooms, change in their attitudes and beliefs can and will follow' (2002: p.388). That is, when teachers see evidence of improvement in the performance of their students, then this experience will probably shape their attitudes (Guskey, 2002).

3.6 Challenges of EFL Curricula in Arab educational settings

It is evident that Arab countries have placed strong emphasis on improving EFL learning. However, these Arabic countries may be perceived as being somewhat behind in the development of EL learning due to poorly developed EL curricula. According to Al-Hazmi (2003), many students in these countries leave secondary education without the ability to carry out even a short, everyday conversation in English. Despite many years of instruction in this language, there is little language proficiency, a sign that suggests that the teachers and the students draw limited benefits from their current curriculum and EFL educational strategies.

Several challenges to the successful learning of English have been identified in this context. First, either the teachers have been improperly trained or the methodology used to teach the students is not well-structured (Al-Hazmi, 2003, Fareh, 2010; Shah, Hussain & Nasseef, 2013; Jesry, 2014). The lack of qualified teachers can make it difficult for the proper content of English knowledge to be passed from the teacher to the students. In addition, the lack of properly structured methodology of teaching can make it hard for the students to effectively absorb the content delivered. In others cases, some teachers may have the right EFL knowledge, but they lack the skills to effectively impart such knowledge to the students, skills that are best delivered through a streamlined curriculum.

The second challenge involves the centrality of the curriculum (Fareh, 2010; Shah, Hussain & Nasseef, 2013). In most Arab countries, the curriculum is teacher-centred rather than student-centred. Teachers deliver the EFL instruction material to the students with little to no focus upon fostering an interactive learning environment. In such an approach, the students do not have the opportunity to be reflective or critical and, thus, depend on the teachers to provide the solutions to fix their learning problems. In the case of a student-centred approach, on the other hand, the students take charge of the classroom while their teachers only provide guidance. In this case, they are thus given more of an opportunity to develop solutions to their problems through their own reflective exercises and team work.

The third challenge lies with students' attitudes, e.g. concerning teacher complaints that the students are often not motivated to learn, leading to low proficiency in English (Shah, Hussain & Nasseef, 2013). This may be attributable to a lack of developing skills amongst the students, due to the rote- learning system that is prevalent in these Arab countries. Along with the unqualified teachers and poor teaching methodology, a major challenge for these EFL teachers lies with the type of materials they use. The English textbooks used for lessons are not properly structured, allowing for weaknesses and inconsistencies in curriculum delivery (Fareh, 2010). Moreover, both the students taking English lessons and their teachers are less exposed to frequent English speaking, which makes it difficult for the students to improve their communication in practice. These challenges are often not influential or to blame individually, as collectively they can inhibit the learning process as a whole. It should be further noted that English curricula in most of these Arab countries do not have clear objectives on which they are developed (Rehman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

The following section will review literature related to the challenge of teachers' professional development, including the challenges of Technology and Training.

3.7 Teachers' professional development

With the spread and use of English becoming ever-increasingly more global, EFL teachers are experiencing growing pressure and need to improve their teaching skills

and practices. These global changes require 'teachers who are competent, effective, and dynamic in their orientation' (Ajiboye & Tella, 2007, p.35). Equally, it is evident that different age groups require different forms of teacher education and training. In this regard, teachers' prior beliefs, their theoretical knowledge of teaching, and their actual teaching experience tend to have a notable influence on their professional development as these factors often determine the areas of knowledge those teachers need to improve (*ibid*).

Terms such as 'teacher training' and 'teacher development' are often used interchangeably in literature (Papayianni, 2012). However, it is possible to view the two concepts as being very distinct in specific ways. Firstly, while teacher training is usually managed by others, teacher development is mostly done by the teachers themselves (Edge, 1988 as cited in Wallace, 1991, p. 3), and for the sake of their own improvement and development. Secondly, in contrast to teacher training, which implies predetermined goals and skills for teachers to acquire, teacher development, as Papayianni (2012) asserts, encourages teachers to become 'reflective practitioners' which can be instrumental in effecting changes in their beliefs and the way in which they practise. Thirdly, while teacher training workshops can have little or no lasting effect on the participants' teaching practices during to the short duration of those programmes (Richards & Farrell, 2005), teacher development can have more concrete effects on teachers' performance as it is based on career-lasting learning (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Finally, unlike teacher education training programmes, which have short-term goals that tend to be focused on training teachers to manage their classrooms effectively (Al-Karanseh, 2001), teacher development is focused more on the teachers' long-term goals and the development of their teaching understanding and practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

In order to attain the most desirable teaching outcomes, professional development for language teachers needs to focus on *both* teacher training and teacher development (Papayianni, 2012). In events such as the introduction of a new curriculum, for example, or when new technology is needed in the classroom, teacher training programmes become highly important for teachers to acquire the

necessary skills for integrating technology into their classroom practices (McGrail, 2005) or for delivering the new curriculum in a meaningful way. These programmes are especially pertinent in the light of the global changes in curriculum that affect both the educational results and the teaching methods. It is clearly apparent that, the strategies of teaching English today are significantly different to the strategies of former years, requiring EFL teachers to become trained effectively and to become well-informed about the dynamics of the current EL curriculum. Consequently, teacher professional development and teacher training have become an integral and essential part of curriculum delivery in English learning. EFL professional training, therefore, should encourage teachers to be effectively prepared through attendance of additional educational courses and seminars outside their own educational institution. This development ensures the integration of teacher understanding and advancement into the framework and collective consciousness of the local, national, and international community.

Teacher training programmes should also be designed and arranged based on teachers' actual requirements and needs, especially the challenges they encounter in their classrooms (Moswela, 2006). In his study conducted in Botswana, Moswela (2006) stresses this idea of including the practical and applicable elements throughout the training programmes. From the questionnaires and interviews that he conducted with school teachers and head teachers, Moswela (2006) concludes that 'for teacher development programmes to achieve their intended goal of improving the teaching and learning processes, they should of necessity be based on the actual problems teachers encounter in the classroom' (*ibid*, p.623). This is in line with Papayianni's (2012) assertion that the more the training programmes are contextually designed and developed based on the needs of the participants, the more the teachers can help to make these more effective. That is, it is not enough for teachers to attend one-day in-service training sessions without an opportunity for them to see how these lessons could be effectively applied in their classrooms (McKenzie, 2001).

In her investigation into English language teachers' computer-assisted language learning (CALL) use in secondary education in Cyprus and their beliefs about the

use of technology in teaching, Papayianni (2012) determined that teachers' CALL use is affected by external factors, such as the available training and support, as well as some intrinsic factors, including teachers' beliefs about technology use. Given this assumption that teachers' beliefs play a central role in the process of teacher development and the contention that teachers' beliefs are inflexible and resistant to change (Almarza, 1996; Johnson, 1994), it is necessary to look at whether teacher development and training programmes are effective in changing or influencing teachers' attitudes to teaching approaches in the context of the study at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages.

One of the main challenges of professional development is to motivate and train classroom teachers to make meaningful use of new technologies. In this respect, teacher professional development programmes should encourage teachers to understand that teaching is not effective without the appropriate integration of technology in the classroom (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). As Papayianni (2012) maintains, teachers need to ensure that they widen their knowledge of pedagogical practices, so that they can be selective about the appropriate computer applications and programmes, which both respond to the curriculum and help their students. She further advocates that teachers should learn to be able to help students develop the necessary skills to enable them to work autonomously with technology, which is playing an ever more important role in the world.

Finally, Bruner (1966) argues that the process of EFL teachers' professional competence development and their ability to be more effective and efficient in using and applying research strategies and teaching methods are fundamental to teacher preparation. Collaborative work among teachers that is attained through professional training can develop their creativity and potential. This can make them proactive in facing the challenges they may encounter with the new curricula. Collaboration also complements the fact that the EL process requires proper preparation for core areas such as methodology, grammar, literature, phonetics and culture, and, other subjects and disciplines that could support the effective delivery of English. The pedagogical praxis on which the delivery of such subjects is based helps in the construction of good models that facilitate easy learning. Such pedagogical praxis

should be designed in a way which links more general aspects such as reflective practice, theory, community and society, and other meaningful learning. EL practice requires teachers who have a professional background and teachers who are capable of working with students from diverse backgrounds, with cultural sensitivity. These teachers should be able to adjust to different educational backgrounds and understand the social phenomenon behind such educational systems.

To sum up, and as Papayianni (2012) claims, teacher development also encompasses the desires and requirements of individual teachers. Moreover, the way in which teachers respond to specific training sessions gives an indication about whether those desires and requirements coincide with the trainer's aims and needs.

3.7.1 Role of teachers as curriculum developers

Teaching is the practical manifestation of pedagogy and, therefore, the teacher should be a vital component in any attempt to reform and change should take into account. Teacher involvement should also be considered as a determining factor in institutional and curriculum development, as well as in the personal professional growth and empowerment of teachers themselves. Over the last two decades, the issues of teacher's voice and direct involvement in the processes of curriculum change and development have increasingly been recognised in literature (Carl, 2005; Flores, 2005; Troudi, 2009, Castro, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that teachers have an essential role to play in the educational processes, in general, and in the processes that have to do with curriculum reform, specifically (Castro, 2013). Teacher participation can bring about constructive results, which may lead to active and dynamic curriculum development (Carl, 2009, p. 198). The use of the terms 'teachers' voice', 'teacher empowerment,' and 'teachers' involvement' in this study refer to giving the teachers a space of domination and control in the process of curriculum development and the ability to develop and practise a sense of agency (Canagarajah, 1999; Castro, 2013).

Brown holds that, 'Involving teachers in systematic curriculum development may be the single best way to keep their professionalism vital and their interest in teaching alive' (1995, p. 206). The ownership of curriculum by the teachers through their own

voice is important, since teachers play a key role in ensuring that curriculum changes can be handled by the students (Yildiz *et al.* 1980). Consequently, as stated by Kirk and Macdonald, 'anchoring of teacher voice provides a key to understanding the perennial problem of the transformation of innovative ideas from conception to implementation' (2001, p. 554). Teachers' ownership of curriculum through strong voicing dictates the authority that such a curriculum has. This is in line with Jessop and Penny's (1998) argument that 'for change to be implemented and sustained, teachers need to own the educational innovation and the process of change' (p. 401). Genuine teacher participation in curriculum reform and development is only really possible with the inclusion of knowledgeable teachers, while the omission of teachers' voice in the policy-making process could lead to minimising the value of any changes in curriculum development. According to Morgan & Rinvold (2004), the fact that teachers are developers of curriculum can be supported by the argument that curriculum development is a continuous process that never stops, and only educators are the ones best placed to understand when and where the changes are needed. All policies and changes that are associated with the curriculum must indeed be either initiated by the educators or, at the very least, influenced by them. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that teachers' professional growth and curriculum development are inseparable.

Despite these developments, curriculum development in the context of Arab education has been largely based on the top-down model, which only engages teachers at the implementation stages of the curriculum, rather than at the initiation and development stages (Alwan, 2006). Morgan & Rinvold (2004) in their evaluation assert that such a top-down approach to curriculum development is minimally effective, as the educator component is conspicuously missing in its development. Straker (2008) similarly concurred that an approach integrating the teachers and other education policy-makers in the development of curriculum is likely to be more effective. To empower teachers to effectively participate in curriculum development, particularly in Arab contexts, their task-based research activities should be incorporated into the education systems of these countries in order to boost the quality and standards of the education received by learners.

This important role of the teachers in the process of curriculum development has been clearly acknowledged and highlighted in the literature (Elliot, 1994; Lieberman, 1997; Cuban, 1998; Carl, 2005; Priestley, 2005; Alwan, 2006; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Castro, 2013, etc.). Lieberman (1997), for example, emphasises the significant role that teachers' involvement in administrative decisions might play on the whole process of curriculum change. Similarly, Elliot (1994) views teachers as central agents in the developing of a curriculum, following their experiments with their students in class. Studies in the field of curriculum also suggest that, in order for a centrally-initiated curriculum change to be successful it should actively engage the 'practitioners who are the foot-soldiers of every reform aimed at improving student outcomes' (Cuban, 1998, p. 459). Moreover, studies on curriculum innovation reveal that the 'form which innovation takes in practice is to a large extent dependent on the attitudes and values of these practitioners, notably teachers' (Priestley, 2005, p. 29). Conversely, Carl (2005) presents the negative outcomes that the lack of teachers' involvement in curriculum development may have. He contends that 'By ignoring teachers' voices, the outcomes of new thinking on curriculum development may in fact be thwarted, prolonging the dangerous situation that teachers, as potential curriculum agents, simply remain voices crying in the wildernesses'. Orafi and Borg (2009) also argue that educational innovation can be of limited value if teachers' lived experiences and attitudes are not considered from the very start in the change process. Therefore, to effectively participate in the curriculum delivery, Abdallah (2011) suggests that EFL teachers take part in the design and establishment of curriculum in their respective educational backgrounds.

The role of teachers in curriculum development has continued to be the main focal point for further studies on curriculum change and more attention has been drawn to the fact that effective curriculum change should involve not only administrators and external experts, but also teachers in the curriculum planning and decision-making (Cheng, 1994). Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1998) similarly discuss the important role that teachers play when engaged in curriculum development, along with curriculum evaluation because of their experience in implementing a curriculum in their classrooms. In line with this, Fullan (2007) stresses the importance of the role the educators play in the change process. According to him, in order for a valid

change to occur, educators must have the motivation and the belief in the viability, value and potential of the proposed change. Educators must also believe in both the meaning of the proposed change and their meaningful role in it. Additionally, to cement that change, educators must also be able to demonstrate that they have experienced some success with it.

A debate has ensued as to whether the involvement of teachers should be considered at the implementation stage or whether their voices should be accommodated in all stages of the curriculum change (Peng, 2004). In support of this latter argument, most of the recent curriculum studies in literature appear to propose that teachers should factor in all the different stages and processes of curriculum development (Jessop & Penny, 1998; Carl, 2005; Alwan, 2006; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Kasapoglu, 2010; Castro, 2013, etc.). For Carl (2005), in order to ensure that teachers take ownership of the new developed curriculum in a significant way, teachers' voices should be heard right from the initial stages of curriculum planning and development as they hold the principal role in its implementation, application and dissemination. Similarly, Castro (2013) stresses that teachers' integration into the process of curriculum development could result in: the advancement of their professional development, the improvement of their personal commitment and satisfaction, and the increase of their self-esteem and professional status. Teachers should be given an opportunity to increase their sense of agency in the process of curriculum development in order to be influential active agents. In this regard, Carl (2005) states, 'it is clear that quality teachers' participation and involvement are essential, and change leaders must ensure that teachers are involved in all of the decisions, plans and activities related to the curricular change implementation if it is to be successful' (2005, p.45).

In the Arab world, in general, and particularly in the context of this study teachers' voice in the curriculum development tends to be minimal because of the model that most of these countries adopt (Al-Shehri, 2009). Until the proposed integrated pedagogical praxis combining both top-down and down-top models are adopted and applied, the teachers' role in curriculum development will remain minimal.

3.8 Summary

In this chapter, an overview of the literature relevant to my area of investigation has been provided. More specifically, a detailed review of relevant studies within the paradigm of curriculum change and development has been presented. Here information about curriculum and its relation to the constructs of change, development, and teachers' attitudes have been provided. Since the study attempts to explore EFL teachers' attitudes regarding curriculum change and development in the context of the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages, the main emphasis of the review has been on the ELT curriculum.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

Methodology could be defined as ‘the activity or business of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use’ (Wellington, 2000, p.16). It is the ‘theory whose methods and techniques are appropriate to generate and justify knowledge’ (Ernest, 1994, p. 4). The methodology is usually dictated by the research purpose and can be modified to suit the topic under exploration (King & Horrocks, 2010).

As research methodologies are driven by certain philosophies and assumptions (*ibid*), this study is an exploratory qualitative study that is informed by the interpretive paradigm. This chapter provides a discussion of the philosophical perspective and methodological approach underpinning the current research. Specifically, it introduces my methodological procedures in terms of data collection and data analysis methods; the research participants and research context. It also considers some theoretical underpinnings in terms of the philosophical assumptions of educational research with reference to the present research project. Furthermore, this chapter discusses my understanding of the ontological and epistemological considerations that inform my realities in the study. Lastly, it discusses issues relevant to the trustworthiness and reliability of the collected data; some ethical considerations, together with some of the difficulties and limitations that have been raised during the research study. The following section attempts to justify the selection of the methodology and the theoretical framework, and is preceded by a review of the philosophical assumptions underpinning these.

4.2 Research Design

Designing the research constitutes a crucial phase of the study prior to carrying out any empirical investigation. It is important since it creates rigour and coherence between the several stages of the research. In the interpretive research tradition, such as the one adopted in this study, the research design is particularly important

since it directs the research towards achieving its aims and objectives. Therefore, a good qualitative research study design is one which has a clearly defined purpose including coherence between the research questions and research methods or proposed approaches (Mason, 2002, pp. 9-11). Nonetheless, since educational research always involves elements of the unknown, the research design needs to be flexible. In the light of this argument, my study is informed by the interpretive paradigm and is framed by an exploratory methodological design.

It is notable that, as King and Horrocks (2010) state, 'it is not uncommon for the researcher to feel that the research question is shifting as the study progresses' (p.27). Since my study is entirely qualitative in nature with an exploratory methodology, it has been common for it to have moved in directions which are in 'relevance to the research topic but outside the scope of the original research question(s)' (*ibid*, pp. 27-28). The research questions, therefore, were modified several times throughout the progress of the study and the following final three questions were formulated in accordance with the focus of the current research:

1. What is the nature of EFL teachers' practices within the parameters of the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?
2. What challenges do EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages have in implementing and using the ELT materials?
3. How do EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages view the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation?

The research questions were articulated based on previous studies and literature on curriculum change and development and within the context of the current area of investigation. These questions can be perceived as pivotal in guiding my choice of the exploratory methodology and the data collection methods, and in developing and designing the instruments for gathering the required information.

4.3 Interpretive research paradigm

Within the framework of research and following Erickson (1986), the term 'interpretive' is used to indicate an abiding interest and the shedding of light upon

the meaning that people attribute to and find in social life, and its subsequent articulation and detailing. Furthermore, according to writers such as Walsh *et al* (1993) at its heart lies a 'passion' to understand and appreciate the meaning that people construct and attribute to their daily social activities. Research based on an interpretivist approach has a view of ontology in which 'social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations' (Crotty, 1998, p. 11).

From the same perspective, interpretivists recognise that epistemology is built through social construction of the world. They believe that knowledge mirrors people's particular objectives, culture, experience and history (Weber, 2004). Interpretivists believe that reality and the individual who observes it are both dependent on each other (Olesen, 1994). They also argue that one's perceptions about the world are reflexive of a stream of experiences that people have had throughout their lives and which adds to the overall interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). Furthermore, research based on an interpretivist approach holds a view of ontology in which, 'social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations' (Crotty, 1998, p. 11). Social reality, in this respect, is best understood through subjective understanding in which reality is connected to the meaning we give to it, in the social context where it is formed. In this sense, my investigation of the beliefs of my participants regarding curriculum change and development is informed by the interpretivist tradition. Although I firstly approached the problem with some 'loosely' defined research questions, I continued to aim by this means to utilise exploratory principles. After that, and during the actual carrying out of the study, those initial questions were developed and largely shaped by the joint realities I constructed with my participants. To avoid positivistic assumptions regarding my approach to research, I approached the scene under investigation very much like a 'discovery' so that its general principles would guide my final claims to a contribution to knowledge.

However, according to the interpretivist stance of knowledge, the life-world is described as being both subjective and objective. It is subjective in the sense that it

reflects our perceptions about the meaning of the world, while objective at the same time because it reflects our negotiation of this meaning when we interact with others (Weber, 2004). Interpretivists recognise that epistemology is built through social construction of the world. As such, my stance of *realities* is subject to this argument. In other words, I aimed to practice reflexivity during the whole research project, so that it would be possible for me to minimise my biases and prejudices by negotiating and exchanging my meanings with those of my participants. Specifically, the issue of curriculum change and development is an issue that is closely-related to the world views of people; especially to groups such as teachers, students, and policy makers, in such a way that each perceives the notion of 'better' from a rather different perspective. In this respect, I perceive my role, as a researcher, to be as an intermediary between theoretical elements of curriculum change and those of my participants. In other words, although my assumptions are inherently theory-laden, importantly, they are also context-specific. In this sense, I perceive knowledge as being built through social construction of the world in which I attempt to make sense of the world, recognising that the participants' sense-making activities occur within the framework of their life-worlds and the particular goals they have for their work.

4.3.1 Ontological assumptions

Ontology is defined as 'the study of being. It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such' (Crotty, 2009, p.10). It addresses philosophical views about the core of reality and the being that can be known. One essential ontological question, therefore, could consider, 'whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations; whether there is a common, shared, social reality or just multiple context-specific realities; and whether or not social behaviour is governed by 'laws' that can be seen as immutable or generalisable' (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p.11). Within such an understanding of the philosophical theory of the nature of social reality, the ontology which underlies this study is that of multiple realities, which sees reality as being created through 'the negotiation of meanings', that are socially constructed (Pring, 2000, p. 55). This comes within the philosophy of naturalism which claims that 'there exist multiple realities which are, in the main, constructions existing in the minds of the people' (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 81). This mode of enquiry

emphasises the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by any natural laws and thus these realities are devised by individuals who are trying to construct some meaning of their experiences in an interactive manner (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Such an orientation tends to place emphasis and value on human understanding, and interpretive aspects of knowing about the social world and the significance of the investigator's own interpretations and understandings of the phenomenon being studied (Crotty, 2003). Nunan (1986) also asserts that reality is constructed and acknowledged in context. That is, it is obtained by exploring the cultural meanings revealed by the behaviour of the subjects. In the light of this argument and to exemplify this, an exploratory qualitative methodology was conducted to researching the current situation of ELT curricula in one of the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. Through this investigation, I have attempted to reach reality by means of seeking information regarding the attitudes of EFL teachers in that institute and then negotiating meaning of their attitudes about curriculum development and change with them. In other words, in view of the exploratory nature of this research, and its context-specificity, I believe the naturalistic orientation of interpretive/ qualitative research was an appropriate choice to achieve the aims of my current study. That is, in this study, the interpretive approach aims at understanding the context within which the participants act, and understanding the process by which events and actions take place (Maxwell, 1996).

Therefore, the current study is an attempt to construct meaning by interpreting views from EFL teachers' different perspectives to explore the meanings that they construe about curriculum change and development. A constructionist stance has thus been adopted, embedded in a qualitative approach, where meaning is not created but constructed in that, 'what we have to work with is the world and objects in the world' (Crotty, 2003, p. 44).

4.3.2 Epistemological assumptions

In my study, an attempt has been made to keep a parallel between ontological and epistemological assumptions, where both of them emerge from one philosophical stance (Grix, 2004). As such, while the ontological stance of the current research is that of multiple realities, the epistemological stance is that of constructionism, which

assumes reality as based on understanding which arises from thinking about what happens to us, and not just simply from having had particular experience (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp. 11-13). This kind of epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the social world including knowledge about reality, and the basis and nature of knowledge (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp. 13-15). That is, knowledge is created from the environment and thus the world is subjectively known and constructed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) as 'there are multiple interpretations of, and perspectives on, single events and situations' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 22). This epistemology has underpinned the data collection methods in order to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the wider research.

Therefore, knowledge in the study was seen as dependent upon 'human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). It is 'an active construction built up by the individual acting within a social context that shapes and constrains that knowledge, but does not determine it' (Applebee, 1993 in Miller & Legge, 1999, p. 15). In this research, I have tried to seek reality about ELT curriculum in the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages through a qualitative study in an exploratory mode. This was conducted in a way where 'significant features of the culture are allowed to emerge' (Holliday, 1997, p. 213). In sum, I have decided to use an exploratory qualitative methodology in my study for the following key reasons.

Firstly, the objects of my study and its goals differ from all earlier studied objects in this context. That is, no earlier studies have been conducted in the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages to explore teachers' attitudes about the potential effective role they might play in the process of curriculum change and design. In other words, in the light of the existing theories about curriculum change and development in Syria, the object of this study appears to be somewhat different from those constructs that have been explored before. Secondly, literature on curriculum studies shows that a suitable approach to investigate teachers' beliefs of curriculum change and development would be an explorative one (Golombek, 1994; Gatbonton, 1999; Johnson, 1999; Hedgcock, 2002 in Alwan, 2006). Thirdly, it is hard to start the study

by defining its concepts precisely because of the gradual process of collecting data. Here, this methodology helped to start with a preliminary notion of the object of the study and its context, and after that these provisional concepts gradually gained more definition and pertinence during the research (Creswell, 2009). Fourthly, I believe that exploratory studies can focus more precisely on my own personal theories and concerns. That is, the exploratory design has been developed in this study to specifically provide an understanding of the meaning that curriculum change has for the EFL teachers who are involved in this study, and the perspectives that inform their actions (Maxwell, 2005).

Finally, because of the exploratory nature of the research, the study started with a rather a vague impression of what I could expect in my study, which made it difficult to state a detailed work plan in advance. On this basis, I have chosen to collect data personally from the research context in Syria using both semi structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires as the main tools for data collection. However, and while progressing in my research, the plan has been changed to using online facilities for collecting data instead of face-to-face ones. This was changed due to the rapid changing of the political scene in Syria, the research site of the current study, from which I was supposed to gather my information. Consequently, I have chosen not to access the research site physically due to safety concerns during the course of the research. It is noteworthy here that I recognise that the insights gained through this study are specific to the particular and local time and place of the research. With this in mind, I do not seek to generalise my findings beyond the research context. Instead, I can take the understandings I have gained to be dealt with as tentative hypotheses that can contribute as a knowledge base for future studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

4.4 Being an ‘insider researcher’

The term ‘insider researcher’ refers to when researchers conduct a research study with participants of a group of which they are members (Kanuha, 2000). In this case, the researcher shares an identity, language, and some experience with the participants (Asselin, 2003). As such, I have identified myself as a ‘researcher from within’, namely someone who is familiar with the research context and of living the

same experience, i.e. teaching English at the same research site as my participants. This method has allowed me to enter the research process from inside and within an 'interpretive community' which incorporates its own historical traditions into a different point of view. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), there is no place or time outside the observer from which he or she can objectively view and judge the validity of knowledge claims. This insider position has appeared to have granted me more acceptance by the participants, who were consequently more open with me, than initially anticipated. This in turn had a significant impact upon the depth and authenticity of the depth of the data collected. When reflecting upon the interviews conducted, I realise that on certain occasions I shared common opinions, attitudes and experiences with my participants. The role of being an 'insider researcher' was also apparent when interpreting the data gathered in this research because it was difficult to place myself as an outsider. Consequently, I tended to interpret the findings based on my own prior knowledge of the context and on my experiences whilst teaching in the very same setting. Finally, as Adler and Adler (1987) state any distinction between the researcher and participants, 'traditionally exist[ed] more strongly in theory than in practice' (p.85) and that, 'objectification of the self [occurs] in the analysis rather than [in] the fieldwork' (ibid. p. 85). The research instruments and the methods for data analysis will be discussed in detail in the following section.

4.5 Sample Population

King and Horrocks state that the sample of a qualitative research 'needs to relate in some systematic manner to the social world and phenomena that a study seeks to throw light upon' (2010, p. 29). As the study seeks to explore teachers' practices and attitudes regarding the issue of curriculum change and development, the participants mainly comprised EFL teachers at the Teaching English as a Foreign Language within the language department (TEFL), at the Higher Institute of Languages, Damascus University, Syria. Different EFL teachers from the Higher Institute of Languages were selected to represent almost all of the teachers of English at this institute. Due to the difficulties of accessibility and availability, I chose teachers from the permanent teachers' staff teaching there to be the target population of my study. The sample of the study, therefore, was selected according to two criteria: purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2011) and it consists of both male and

female teachers. As Barbour (2001) points out, a ‘purposeful or ‘theoretical’ sample is common in qualitative research since it offers the researcher a degree of freedom and control rather than being at [the] mercy of any selection bias in the pre-existing groups’ (p.115). Qualitative researchers thus seek to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 29) to achieve variability in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and to the selection of cases on the basis of access (Burton, 1996). Within these parameters, the teachers were selected from those sharing some common characteristics, in that they all have the same academic degree and qualifications, as this is a prerequisite for teachers to teach there. Added to which, they all teach the same materials and come from the same culture. However, the teaching experience and the background knowledge differed somewhat between the teachers according to how many years they have been teaching and the training courses they have done. As the teachers were purposefully selected, their participation depended solely on their consent and willingness. The interviewed sample might also be considered an ‘opportunity sample’ as it included only those who were available when the inquiry was being conducted and that these participants met the criteria initially set by the researcher (Wragg, 1978). The samples of population in both research methods numbered 26 participants for the open-ended questionnaires from which 5 participants expressed their willingness to be interviewed in this study. The table below shows the distribution of the questionnaire sample:

Variable	Sub-variables	Frequency
Gender	Male	12
	Female	14
Age	25-29	14
	30-34	6
	35-39	4

	40 or more	2
Degree qualification	Diploma in Education	2
	Masters in Education	24
Years of teaching experience	5-10	22
	11 or more	4

Table 4.1 Distribution of the questionnaire sample.

4.6 Research Instruments

The data collection methods in my study are essentially qualitative. For this purpose, two data collection instruments were used with the assumption that ‘humans are complex, and their lives are ever changing. The more methods we use to study them, the better our chances will be to gain some understanding of how they construct their lives and the stories they tell us about them’ (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 688). In my exploration of EFL teachers’ perceptions of how they see their potential role in the process of curriculum change and development, I focus on a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of their worldviews, which provides more ‘trustworthy’ assumptions. That is, since the choice of data collection methods depends on the nature of research questions, research context, research structure and research timeframe (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 13-43), my research instruments depend mainly on which type of data would best illuminate the research topic, drawing on practical considerations and the ontological and epistemological positions of the research. Therefore, and because of being informed by an exploratory methodology, the research questions framing my study were addressed interpretively through qualitative analysis of both semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. In this respect, two different methods for data collection were used to look at the issue of ELT curriculum change and development from different angles and positions in order to help towards a more balanced approach and deeper understanding, as posited by Grix (2004). As Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Holliday (2001) argue, in interpretive research data should be collected in its natural setting. However, and as Glesne and Peshkin

(1992) state, qualitative researchers have to tolerate ambiguity and be willing to accept the demands that this type of research requires (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992 in Alwan, 2006, p. 88). It is necessary to note that that this was indeed the case for this current research. Due to access difficulties because of the political events that began taking place in the research site during the initial stages of the study, the data was collected using remote internet-based data collection techniques such as the computer mediated communication tools.

Therefore, since the study is an interpretive and qualitative one with the primary goal of understanding 'the inner perspectives and meanings of actions and events of those being studied' (Anderson & Burns, 1989, p. 67), the design for collecting data entailed using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The two methods were conducted simultaneously in order to collect a wide range of data that are required for answering research questions and attaining the study's aims and objectives. Firstly, an open-ended questionnaire, the primary method for data collection, was designed through which information was gathered about EFL teachers' practices using the current ELT materials at the Higher Institute of Languages in Syria. This was further used also to gather data about the main challenges those EFL teachers have in using and implementing the ELT curriculum together with their views about the future of their involvement in curriculum design and usage. The open-ended questionnaire method was also supported by semi-structured interviews with some of the EFL teachers at the Higher Institute of Languages. The interviews were conducted, in order to ensure that more in-depth and rich data were collected, by benefiting from two instruments for data collection. This also served to obtain a deeper understanding of curriculum change and development from an exploration of the opinions, perceptions and experiences of those teachers who are involved in the study.

However, and as previously highlighted, due to the special circumstances in the research site of my study and the physical distance from the participants, both semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires took place via online facilities. The open-ended questionnaires were sent to the participants by email and by using SurveyMonkey. Similarly, the participants were interviewed remotely via Skype. The

use of remote techniques as research methods for collecting data may not be regarded as successful and efficient as face-to-face communication techniques, which usually enable the researcher to attain an effective one-on-one interaction with the study participants. Nevertheless, remote techniques can have the advantage of 'facilitating the inclusion of participants who are geographically distant from the interviewer, without the need for time-consuming and expensive travel or the recruitment of local interviewer' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 80). This can also have the advantage of enabling the participants to choose the time that most suits them so they can schedule an interview or respond to e-mailed questions at their convenience (Opdenakker, 2006; King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 80). In addition, using remote techniques for collecting data gives the participants more time to reflect on a question which reduces the possibility of having unanswered questions and it can increase the chance of having a basis for the richness of the data collected (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Kivits, 2005; Opdenakker, 2006). As such, it might provide the participants with the opportunity to find the information they require in order to answer the questions (Bampton & Cowton, 2002, Bloor & Wood, 2006; Opdenakker, 2006; King & Horrocks, 2010). Finally, as this method uses technology, it can offer a significant saving in terms of time, because the data can be directly downloaded into a file on the computer, avoiding the need for time-consuming transcription (*ibid*).

In the following sections, a theoretical overview and a rationale for both of these methods are both provided.

4.6.1 Open-ended Questionnaire

The use of an open-ended questionnaire constitutes the main data collection instrument for carrying out the investigation in this research project. This was used as an instrument for data collection for the following reasons. Firstly, it is a quick method of attaining information from a large number of participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Secondly, in the questionnaires, there is no 'interviewer effect' on the answers (Grix, 2004, p. 129). That means that, any potential bias, intentional or unintentional, that might be caused by the interviewer subjectivity can be avoided and responses can be anonymous if deemed desirable (Bell, 1999). Therefore, it allows the participants to express their opinions freely without being influenced by

the researcher (Foddy, 1993, p.127). Thirdly, questionnaires are economical (Denscombe, 1998, p. 106) and easy to construct. Questionnaires are often viewed as important tools for collecting data in educational research (Oppenheim, 2000, p.10) as they offer the possibility of clarifying the framework of investigation both conceptually and structurally and of facilitating the process of analysis of the data acquired (Wellington, 2000; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Using questionnaires also marks a move away from the possibility of the interviewer's subjectivity and it can be conducted to explore a diversity of educational phenomena such as the perceptions of teachers and principals about various schools' reform proposals (Borg, Gall & Gall, 1993).

Open-ended questions were applied to give each participant the opportunity to freely add their comments, express their opinions, and/ or talk about their views to the future of ELT curriculum development. Therefore, the participants were encouraged to write down their thoughts spontaneously, which is worthwhile as a basis for new hypotheses (Oppenheim, 2000). The questionnaire attached in Appendix D and used in the current study was group-administered using SurveyMonkey, in order to investigate the teachers' attitudes towards their potential contribution in developing an ELT curriculum in the context of the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages, Damascus University. An email was sent to all of the teachers (permanent staff) from the selected sample by eliciting the help of the Institute's administration staff. In this email, it was explained in detail the purpose of the study and how important the teachers' contribution would be to the research. It was emphasised that their contribution would be entirely anonymous and voluntary. A link to the open-ended questionnaire using SurveyMonkey was included in this same email. In addition, this link was also posted on the Facebook page of this same group of teachers. In the end, I received 26 completed open-ended questionnaires.

4.7 Design of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was laid out with an attached cover letter at the beginning, in which I introduced myself and the topic and purpose of the study. In the covering letter, the participants were also assured of their anonymity and confidentiality and that their participation was entirely voluntary. The initial draft of the questions used

in the open-ended questionnaire was further developed with regard to the related literature and reading informing it, as well as reference to other questionnaires in similar studies in the field of curriculum change and development. At the start, the questionnaire had consisted of 29 questions which are all open-ended and related to the EFL teachers' practices in their classrooms and to their beliefs and views regarding curriculum change, curriculum development, and curriculum implementation. The initial draft of my questionnaire was checked by obtaining opinions from my study supervisors and the opinions of two of my colleagues who are experts in the field of curriculum studies. Under the guidance of my supervisors and the opinions of my colleagues, some items on the questionnaire were removed, changed, and modified. The aim behind this intensive review to the research instrument was to determine whether the questions were representative of my area of interest and to ensure that this instrument is clear and viable enough to collect rich data. The questionnaire then resulted in 30 final items, divided into three sections, (see appendix D) which are all derived from the three main research questions.

4.6.2 Semi-structured Interviews

In addition to the open-ended questionnaire, qualitative interviewing techniques were also used as a method for collecting data in the study. Qualitative research interview could be defined as 'an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale, 2007, p.174). It is 'an active encounter in which someone seeking information is supplied with it by another' (Radnor, 1994, p. 13). Qualitative interviews are characterised as having an informal, conversational character, being shaped partly by the interviewer's pre-existing topic guide and partly by concerns that are emergent in the interview (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 104).

In the light of this and because of the exploratory qualitative purpose of my study, I have chosen semi-structured type of interviews for data collection. This type of interview enables the researcher to conduct an interview with a general idea of the direction of the interview and its desired outcomes. That is, semi-structured interviews are more directed by a set of general themes to encourage the

interviewees to talk about their experiences and views about a specific phenomenon (Radnor, 1994). Similarly, Kvale (2007) argues, in this regard, that a research interview is 'not an open and dominance of free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his or her research interests' (p, 485). Semi-structured interviews were thus used to allow for a 'considerable flexibility over the range and order of questions within a loosely defined framework' (Parsons, 1984, p. 80). They were used because they provide the researcher with the flexibility of non-structured techniques, whilst being easier for the interviewer to maintain the desired focus (Harris & Bell, 1994). Semi-structured interviews rather than structured ones were used also because the primary purpose of this investigation is to describe the phenomenon of curriculum change and development from the standpoints of the interviewees. It was used in order to facilitate further probing into the issue (Robson, 2002; Brown & Dowling, 2009) of teachers' attitudes towards their role in the process of curriculum change and development at the Higher Institute of Languages in Syria. The semi-structured technique for interviewing was also used to allow a space where richer in-depth responses can be provided, through challenging the interviewees by probing deeper into their experiences, attitudes, and future views on a number of issues relevant to curriculum change and development in my context. Moreover, the semi-structured interview method was chosen to make the study subjective by bridging between the researcher and the respondents' realities to maintain an imaginative sharing of and subsequent description of their realities (Bloor & Wood, 2006). This enables the research participants' voice, whether through their digressions and additions, to remain the basic contribution to my questions.

In this respect, the main topics are outlined which are covered in this particular area of investigation of curriculum change and development, (See Appendix B) in a flexible way concerning the phrasing of the questions and the order in which they will be asked in a manner that the questions were dependent on the participants' responses. The purpose behind this was to allow the participants 'to lead the interaction in unanticipated directions' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 35) and to avoid leading questions that may direct the interviewees to specific answers (*ibid*). Since the aim of a qualitative interview is 'to elicit participants' accounts of aspects of their

experience, rather than to collate answers to specific questions' (*ibid*), the interview questions remained discretionary and subject to modification in the light of the insights I gained in the process of carrying out the interviews, especially during the first few interviews and the ones at the piloting stage. Following this, five interviews were conducted using Skype facilities. However most of this was carried out by Skype messages rather than by voice calls, due to bad internet connections during the course of conducting the interviews. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The interviewees were those who had responded to my email and who were willing to be interviewed.

The following section sets out the rationale behind and the design and delivery of the pilot study.

4.7 The pilot study

Since piloting research instruments is considered to be crucial for testing the data collection methods, the pilot study was effected for the following main reasons.

Firstly, it was necessary to ensure that the structure and organisation of the instruments were easy to follow for the participants and that they met all the inherent requirements of the target research. Secondly, it was imperative that the questions in my instrument were adequate enough to collect the data needed for the study. Thirdly, the pilot study was used in order to check the ways and means of establishing a good rapport with the participants with both the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Fourthly, the pilot study was carried out to identify any ambiguities or inappropriate wordings; to identify any items that might cause misunderstanding or confusion, and to check the extent of responsiveness to the instrument, especially in the open-ended questionnaires. Finally, there was a need for the research instruments to provide rich and workable data for the study since these would be collected via online facilities.

First of all, the questionnaire was initially tested on a work colleague. Then, it was tested on a sample of three teachers who share the similar teaching context at the Higher Institute of Languages and academic background as the study participants in

order to increase the reliability of the research instrument (Bell, 1993). For this to be the case, all the teachers who participated in this pilot study had the same academic and professional background and all of the teachers had been at the same academic context of the Higher Institute of Languages for at least four years. All of the teachers had a Master's degree in TEFL. The questionnaire was sent to the teachers by email and their feedback to the instrument was highly encouraged. The responses were sent back by email as well. Teachers' feedback indicated that some of the questions were repetitive in certain parts and they advised me to reduce this repetition where possible. These questions were amended based on the teachers' feedback; especially in the sections talking about assessment and teachers' autonomy.

As for the semi-structured interviews, I conducted two pilot Skype interviews with two work colleagues before finalising the main interviews in order to help in more precisely predicting the length of an interview; to avoid being subject to any possible bias and to help in anticipating problems (Bell, 1999) that might be faced during the process of interviewing. This was also useful to reduce the amount of redundant questions, and create the possibility of generating follow-up questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews was more appropriate to the study's objectives (Grix, 2004). That is, the semi-structured interviews had predetermined questions, but also allowed for any kind of needed modification and random additional questions as and when they occurred. First of all, I tried to interview them remotely by voice calls, but due to bad and intermittent internet connections, I decided to interview my participants using Skype messages. However, both interviewees in the pilot study indicated that the interviews took a very long time. I tried to mitigate this in the actual study interviews to avoid boredom and disengagement on the part of my participants.

4.8 Data Analysis

Within the tradition of qualitative research, a general inductive approach was used to analyse the data obtained via semi-structured interviews and open-ended items in the questionnaire so as to allow the research findings to emerge from frequent and significant themes without imposing structured methodology (Silverman, 2001; Ezzy, 2002). Thomas (2003) asserts that the inductive approach for analysing data allows the research objectives to be achieved in the interpretive process. It also

allows multiple reading and interpretations of the corpus of the raw data, so that it helps to develop categories from data into a model framework shaped by the key themes (*ibid*). Additionally, in this approach the research findings are both shaped by multiple interpretations of the data as well as the researcher's theoretical positions and personal experiences. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the findings, in this approach, would be maintained by comparisons and experiences from previous research as well as with feedback from the research participants (*ibid*). The analysis here gives 'thick' (Geertz, 1973) layers of description and insightful views about the participants' perceptions of their role in the process of curriculum development. In this way, the implications of the study were drawn out of this analysis.

It is important to comment here that the process of data analysis in this study was conducted simultaneously with data collection in order to enable consistent and developing focus to be maintained in the interviews and to decide how to test the emerging conclusions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 2). This helps the enquiry to be able to probe deeper as the researcher has the flexibility to pursue issues raised by the data collected in the earlier stages of the research (Radnor, 2002).

4.8.1 Data analysis process

As already discussed, the data was predominantly collected using open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The interview data analysis was guided primarily by the three concurrent flows of activity suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) namely: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. Interviews and questionnaires as primary data collection methods provide useful information to be used in data analysis (Randor, 2001; Holliday, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Bryman, 2008).

With regard to the process of data analysis, the first step required careful consideration of the determined research questions and the relevant responses to each one. The questionnaires generated many initial data and ideas. One of the benefits of using open-ended questions in a questionnaire is that the respondents are free to answer as much as and however they want. In this way, more ideas were generated during the data analysis process which were helpful in guiding the

researcher and where the new ideas generated even helped in creating an area of new knowledge in answer to the main research questions.

Data reduction was then conducted by dividing the sample data into smaller chunks through labelling and coding in assigning meaningful units to the data (Randor, 2001). In this regards, bigger patterns and narrower patterns of information were generated, depending on the specificity of answers given by the respondent. This assisted into converting the extensive amounts of data into controllable and manageable segments. Reducing the data into smaller units through labeling and coding tends to make it easy for subsequent data analysis in the enquiry (Bryman, 2008).

Secondly, the display of the data was carried out through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is considered to be one of the most effective way of data representation and can help significantly with data discussion in light of the literature review used in the study (Aronson, 1994; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Thematic charts were developed through identification of all data which is pertinent to the previously-classified patterns and, thus, a combination and cataloguing of inter-related data patterns into sub-themes builds credible and valid arguments for selecting appropriate study themes. In this regard, all the codes were grouped into categories or themes. That is, files were opened for each category and then all the recorded sources of the data relating to that code were copied and pasted. (See Appendix F for an example of coding)

Lastly, conclusion verification was established by what Holliday (2002) refers to as the 'data combination'. That is, commentary arguments were produced with thorough descriptions and insightful perceptions being determined following the analysis of the teachers' attitudes and experience towards curriculum change and development in the English language teaching department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages: the key aim of the study. The same procedure was carried out with the data collected from the open-ended questionnaires. In doing so, the aim was to ascertain vivid and meaningful answers to the research questions as well as providing implications and submissions for future enquiry.

The following example shows how the identification of the main categories and sub categories for the research questions was grouped.

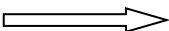
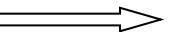
Main categories under Research Question 1

Teachers practices in the current materials:

- **Teaching Methods (TM)**
- **Approaches to Teaching (AT)**
- **Needs Analysis (NA)**
- **Learners' Different Styles (LDS)**

The coding process is crucial because without it the analysis of textual data cannot be realised. Moreover, the coding process is the most important part of the data analysis process as the data is grouped, restricted, and content is analysed. After this has been successfully carried out for one category, the whole process has then been repeated for other categories or themes.

For purposes of validity, direct quotation in participants' own words from the primary data collection methods: interview and questionnaire is presented. It is introduced as follows:

Quotation		Layan (OQ6) – Open-Questionnaire 6
Quotation		Samar (In 1) – Interview 1

With regards to the themes arising during the process of data analysis, three key themes have been identified which have guided the discussion chapter in this study: (1) the different EFL *teachers' practices* with the current ELT materials at the Higher Institute of Languages, (2) the main *challenges* that EFL teachers have in implementing the curriculum in the setting of the institute, and (3) the EFL teachers' views on *the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum* planning, design, implementation and evaluation. The research themes, sub-themes, and constructs are displayed in the following table:

Themes	Sub-themes	Constructs
EFL teachers' current practices	Teaching methods and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approaches to teaching • Teaching procedures • Planning procedures
	Teaching materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The textbook • New Trends in Education • Workbook, teachers' Book, and supplementary materials • Assessment and evaluation
	Evaluation of the teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflection • Peer evaluation • Reacting to learners' needs • Learners' different styles
EFL teachers' challenges with materials	Implementation challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid administrative rules • Time barriers • Lack of motivation • Misplaced students
	Challenges to professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher autonomy • Challenge of training • Challenge of technology
	Barriers for the aims and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of Awareness
EFL teachers' involvement in the curriculum processes	Teachers attitudes towards new curricula	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers' understanding of 'curriculum' • The need for a new curriculum • Expectations of the new curriculum
	Teachers' attitudes towards curriculum planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs Analysis • Environment analysis

	Teachers' role in curriculum design	
	Teachers' role in curriculum evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Channelling the potential curriculum • Effectiveness • Evaluating
	Teachers as 'decision-makers'	

Table 4.2. Research Themes, Sub-themes, and Categories.

These themes have been developed from the objectives of the study as guided by the findings (the various components of the primary data collection methods used). Once all themes, categories, and subcategories were satisfactorily grouped and coded, the next step was to write the data analysis chapter based on the following two main stages.

4.8.2 Description

This stage of data analysis mainly focuses on analysing the content collected through interviews and the open-ended questionnaires. The description process involved giving a report of what people said or answered when asked a certain question in the interview process. It also gives a description of the direct answers given in specific questions in the questionnaire. One of the key themes of focus which the research main questions focused on, for example, was the way in which EFL teachers plan their lessons. This topic was organised into three or four other sub-categories explaining the central theme of the study in detail. Under each subcategory, each participant's words about that section are presented in detail. Once all the responses had been described, the next step was interpretation.

4.8.3 Interpretation

It is at this stage of the analysis that the researcher interprets the data described above. It is necessary to incorporate each response into the general understanding. Individual responses that were echoed by most of the respondents were directly

related both to the research context and the three central research questions. Interpreting the information appropriately and sufficiently necessitated making reference to other researchers' ideas and theories in the area of curriculum design and development. However, this was done in such a way as to focus solely on the main research questions and the higher education context and not on other research concerns or on other educational contexts or settings.

4.9 Trustworthiness

Bell argues that, 'whatever procedure for collecting data is selected, it should always be examined critically to assess to what extent it is likely to be reliable and valid' (1999, p. 189). As my study is qualitative in nature, any claims to knowledge are acknowledged to be theory-laden and context-specific (Scheurich, 1997). I also acknowledge that my construction of reality is restricted to the context of this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In this regard, any unjustified claims outside the research context and the constructivist arguments of this study are avoided. Additionally, there is the underlying belief that some degree of credibility has been established, as I have identified myself as a 'researcher from within', namely someone who is familiar with the research context and of living the same experience. Further credibility has been attained by providing information and justification on the methods used for collecting the data in the current research (Robson, 2002).

The validity of the questionnaire was assessed by its 'construct validity', 'face validity' and 'content validity' (Eysenck, 2004). The construct validity was attained by ensuring that the research constructs were operationalised. That is, such constructs would be understood and used in accordance with the relevant literature. Face validity was also established by ensuring that the measures of the questionnaire would reflect the concepts being measured perhaps most importantly, content validity was attained firstly by selecting questionnaire items which closely reflect the research aims and objectives, and secondly by discussing the items with three experts in the field of curriculum change and then modifying those items based on these experts' recommendations. In general, the interviews and questionnaires used in the enquiry as primary data collection methods were designed and used in the most objective way possible. Everything was done to minimise the influence of the

researcher on the outcome in order for the final outcome to be considered trustworthy (Cresswell, 2009). Additionally, credible and valid references were used in the write-up of the research.

4.10 Research Ethics

When conducting any educational research, certain ethical dimensions are required to be taken into consideration. As Bloor and Wood claim,

'ethics are guidelines or sets of principles for good professional practice, which serve to advise and steer researchers as they conduct their work ... Ethics is a branch of philosophy which is concerned with thinking about mortality, integrity and the distinction between right and wrong' (2006: p. 64).

In line with this, Jupp (2006) asserts that research is generally justified in terms of what it adds to knowledge, which can then be regarded as being for social good or benefit. He argues that, 'ethical problems in research arise from the tensions between this objective and the rights and interests of individuals and groups which may be affected' (p. 96). Observing ethical standards is extremely important in research especially when it involves human participants (Nunan, 1997). Bearing this in mind, it has been necessary to incorporate some ethical dimensions into the process of conducting the current research. Therefore, and since the research has used qualitative methods for collecting the data, certain ethical considerations have been taken into account when dealing with the study participants who are EFL teachers selected from a Higher Institute of Languages in Syria.

Firstly, before conducting the research, the research ethics form from the University of Exeter was submitted to the university's research committee for its approval of the study's methods and procedures. In this form the procedures and plans for keeping the participants' anonymity, confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time of the data collection process were outlined.

The most important step within my home Syrian context was firstly to obtain permission to participate in data collection within the ELT department. Additionally, informed consent was sought from all the participants by email. This was attained by providing them with a detailed explanation of: the purpose of the study; the source of funding; how the data would be used; what kind of participation would be required

from them, and how the research would be processed and disseminated. Here, all the necessary steps were taken to ensure that all the participants understood and agreed to the process in which they would be engaging (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Radnor, 2002).

Secondly, the participants were informed that their participation would be entirely voluntary and that they would have the right to withdraw at any stage throughout the study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 1996; Punch, 2009; Frankael & Wallen, 2000; Silverman, 2001). Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality was maintained at all times, whereby their identities were kept as unknown outside the research investigation as possible. In addition, any attributions, which might have identified any participant, whether directly or indirectly, were eliminated or avoided (Burton, 1996; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Punch, 2009). However, due to the nature of the internet-based means of collecting some data, it was not possible to promise the participants complete confidentiality and anonymity (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.98).

Thirdly, further consideration was given to the important guarantee that the participants would not be subject to any harm or danger. Any contact with the participants was therefore totally flexible and at the complete disposal and convenience of the research participants' preferences regarding time and circumstances.

Fourthly, as the research data were obtained via online techniques and facilities, special attention has been paid to the 'ambiguous nature of the public/ private divide on the internet' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.98). This is especially the case when making considerations to key ethical aspects like gaining informed consent and protecting participants from any damage or harm. In this regard, special care has been taken to draw participants' attention to any possible limitations to their privacy when contributing to an internet-based study and that this might ultimately be accessible to system administrators (*ibid*). For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, each copy of the questionnaires and the individual interviews were all assigned a number and pseudonyms were used when reporting data in the data analysis chapter.

4.11 Research Limitations and Challenges

Modood (1999) states, 'no methodology, whatever it is, has ever claimed to be the method' (Modood, 1999 in Gahin, 2001, p. 125). Therefore, although I have attempted to justify the selection of my research methodology and data collection instruments, I do not claim that my choice was the optimum one for the current study. Limitations of the study are 'those conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may place restrictions on the conclusions of the study and their application to other situations' (Best & Khan, 1989, p. 37). Like many other studies in educational research, my study has encountered some difficulties and therefore it follows that there should be some limitations. For example, because this study is a qualitative study which is informed mainly by an exploratory methodology, direct contact with the participants was required. However, within the constraints of the study it was not possible to achieve this kind of contact because of uncontrolled political events and unrest in the site where the research was located, i.e. Syria. Consequently, one of the major limitations was that the study 'provides a limited register for communication' (Bampton & Cowton, 2002 in Opdenakker, 2006). As a result of the use of an asynchronous approach for communication with participants as a source for information, especially with the open-ended questionnaires, the study has a complete lack of social cues such as voice, intonation, body language, etc., that may have helped in providing the extra information normally present in verbal answers to questions (Opdenakker, 2006). This may have also led to a deeper understanding of what interviewees intrinsically meant, when responding to each question (*ibid*). Moreover, the initial response to the questionnaire was very limited and after an extended period of sometimes weeks, it was necessary to remind participants of the importance of their participation and involvement to secure further responses.

In addition, the study's scope was constricted by being unable to collect learner-related data and data from teacher observation due to the difficulty of direct access to the research site. As such, the study lacked the deeper understanding that could have been achieved through teacher observation as it provides a more insightful knowledge of the context in which the events happen (Patton, 2002). Teacher observation could have also helped to explore the extent to which the teachers' attitudes about EFL teaching and curriculum processes are reflected in their actual

practices in the classroom context and to investigate the relationship between what teachers had said in the open-ended questionnaires and interviews and what was observed in their lived experiences in classrooms (Mulhall, 2003).

In addition, the study was limited in its inability to collect data about the processes of curriculum development and change from the perspective of and directly from the learners. Recent research linking student involvement to engagement and achievement has found positive links between engagement and learning (e.g. Carini, Kuh, & Klein's, 2006; Jagersma & Parsons, 2011). Carini, Kuh, and Klein's research (2006), for example, found that 'student engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades' (p. 23). Therefore, exploring learners' attitudes in this study could have helped in gaining a deeper understanding on whether students voice in curriculum processes bring tangible benefits in students' engagement and achievement or not.

Another difficulty encountered was in selecting appropriate and convenient times for conducting interviews with the EFL teachers, who often have very heavy workloads because of the large numbers of students and also sometimes their engagement in private work, or due to the unreliability of or the lack online facilities in the research settings. Furthermore, the short timeframe of the data collection imposed another limitation upon my study. Consequently, it was necessary to devise the research framework carefully with particular attention being paid to its different phases and being responsive and flexible regarding the collection of representative samples of data from different sources. Finally, the study was inherently limited with data being collected from only one educational site in the higher education sector in Syria. This can be attributed to the limited time in which the research was conducted, constraining the sample size. Therefore, the research findings may not be completely representative of teachers' attitudes and perceptions in other institutes.

4.12 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed in details the methodological principles and approach that have guided this study process. The chapter started with a detailed description and justification of the research design and the theoretical framework,

and was followed by a review of the philosophical, ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning it. This was followed by a description of the research sample and site. In particular, the study has adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methods of data collection which could result in the study being considered to be 'mixed-method' research, giving an all-embracing perspective. Consequently, the main issues around the aims and justification of the data collection methods used in this study have been clearly outlined, along with the methods of data collection and analysis and the ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of some of the challenges and limitations encountered.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS & RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter five presents the findings of the study as identified from the data from the research participants. It is divided into three main sections in line with the research questions. The first section describes different EFL *teachers' practices* with the current ELT materials at the Higher Institute of Languages at Damascus University. This section includes a description of the materials, the daily English classes, teaching practices, feedback and assessment practices. The second section presents the findings as related to the main *challenges* that EFL teachers have in implementing the curriculum in the setting of the institute. The last section introduces findings related to the EFL teachers' views on *the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum* planning, design, implementation and evaluation.

5.2 EFL teachers' current practices

Findings regarding the EFL teachers' application of the teaching materials in the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages are categorised as follows: a) the teaching methods and procedures; b) the teaching materials; and c) evaluation of the teaching.

5.2.1 Teaching methods and procedures

Within this section several constructs are explored more closely, given that they appeared as consistent threads of meaning in the data. They include: a) approaches to teaching; b) teaching procedures; and c) planning procedures.

5.2.1.1 Approaches to teaching

Teaching approaches form an important part of the curriculum; they are often deemed to be the action-in-process towards maintaining resolution and success in the learning-teaching processes. In their approaches to teaching, teachers' responses centre upon the following themes: i) teaching skills communicatively or adopting communicative language teaching approaches; ii) using eclectic,

interactive and learner-centred approaches, and iii) adopting a friendly and co-operative ways of teaching. These general themes illustrate the learning and teaching culture that currently exists in the setting for this study.

The communicative language teaching approach (CLT) is referred to mostly by the teachers as the one that is adopted the most. Various teachers' responses on the use of CLT as a teaching method are presented below.

For Ahmad, following the communicative approach is the best way for him to guarantee the ultimate interaction between the teacher and the students and to achieve the course objectives:

I usually follow the communicative language approach that is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasises interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. I see this as the most convenient approach for teaching English. [Ahmad/ Q23]

Similarly, Anas follows the communicative approach in addition to the Engage, Study, and Activate (ESA) approach to achieve the desired outcomes from language teaching:

ESA (Engage, Study, and Activate) was invented and developed by the American scholar Jeremy Harmer. I normally follow ESA and the communicative approach; I also apply real situational English to get learners to speak and to interact. [Anas/ Q25]

As the above excerpts demonstrate, these teachers tend to refer to CLT as the most adopted teaching approach as well as seeming to indicate that this is the most convenient for their teaching context. Given the nature of the current teaching environment, it could be claimed that, in their inclination towards CLT, the teachers are aware of the value of teaching language communicatively in order to prepare the students for using language in authentic settings. Although CLT appears to have a growing and compelling value within the context of EFL, it is interesting to note that there appears to be a tendency of adopting CLT, irrespective of the desired teaching outcomes.

Nevertheless, the teachers here still seem to demonstrate well thought-out strategies in order to achieve the desired learning goals. There is further evidence of teachers' responses which reveal a good working understanding of the need to vary their teaching methodologies to suit any immediate teaching aims and objectives and the proficiency level of their students.

In the following quotations, the teachers express their understanding of the needs of their students through the application of eclectic teaching strategies to meet the linguistic needs of their learners, based on the fact that the students have different understandings of English as it is a foreign language for them. Ramia, for example combines two approaches which are relevant to what might appear learner-centred approach. She refers to both eclectic and interactive approaches so as to maintain balance through involving most of the students in the learning process.

I use [both] the eclectic and the interactive teaching methods to meet the differences amongst the students. [Ramia/ Q4]

In my opinion, such practices by the teachers tend to create a more dynamic atmosphere where they can not only challenge strict policy decisions, but also orientate their teaching methodology in such a way as to develop a closer rapport with their students in classroom settings.

More precisely, the following responses of some of the teachers show their interest in endorsing roles that encourage their learners to assume more active roles in their learning.

"Discover themselves", "student-centred approach" and "friendly and cooperative atmospheres" are all phrases that describe the discourse of several teachers reflecting a genuine interest in advancing an educational 'culture' that places learners at the centre of the educational process. Such themes are of value for looking more closely at the ways in which teachers contribute to promoting change in the curricula policies in the current context. For instance, Leemar comments:

It's actually an integration of all approaches while I try to make students come up with the new information through encouraging them to discover it themselves. [Leemar/ Q8]

Similarly, Aziz tries to incorporate a more contemporary and inclusive type of teaching:

I try to make the atmosphere friendly and cooperative, pair work, group work and games are preferable in my approach. [Aziz/ Q17]

Yara alludes to a more student-centred approach with the students taking a more active role in learning:

I mainly follow the student-centred learning approach as I feel it is the most effective and allows for all students' abilities to be taken into consideration. [Yara/ In5]

As is apparent in these quotations, these teachers do understand the value of transferring the educational 'culture' from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach. Leemar's endeavour '*to make students come up with the new information through encouraging them to discover it themselves*' explains an honest concern from an educator who perceives her students as being able to have an input in their own education. In fact, critical educational discourses into pedagogy often insist on enabling the learners' voice especially when issues relevant to students' own education are at stake.

Kumaravadivelu (1994), meanwhile, in his study relating to 'postmethod' second language teaching focuses on the shift away from the conventional concept of method toward a condition of the postmethod. This postmethod holds the capacity to refigure the relationship between theorists and teachers in that the teachers are empowered with knowledge, skill, and autonomy. So empowered, teachers could devise for themselves a systematic, coherent, and relevant alternative to method, one informed by what Kumaravadelu refers to as '*principled pragmatism*'. He further observes that the condition of the postmethod could reshape the character and content of L2 teaching, teacher education, and classroom research. Kumaravadivelu's work explores one such framework consisting of 10 macrostrategies, based on which teachers can design varied and situation-specific microstrategies or classroom techniques to effect desired learning outcomes. The

study maintains that the framework can be used to transform classroom practitioners into strategic teachers as well as strategic researchers (Kumaravadivelu, 1994).

5.2.1.2 Teaching procedures

Teaching procedures constitute another important aspect of curriculum design, as they embody the actual application and use of teaching materials in the classroom. For the particular interest of the present study, research participants were asked to provide their views about their own present teaching procedures and strategies as part of the curriculum they are using. In the main, the teachers' responses appeared to be representative of many of the strategies one commonly expects to find in the EFL context. At the same time, the findings emerging from the data highlighted issues such as: a) taking up the planning stage of planning as a starting point for teaching practice; b) reducing teacher's-talk time in favour of that of the students; c) encouraging more interaction between teachers and students and between the students themselves; d) engaging all the students in discussions; and e) following 'gradual' strategies (i.e. arranging skills logically according to the learners' needs). These elements are all components of CLT and help to further understanding about this subject. In the following section, these themes are outlined relating them to the overall discussion regarding how they are practised by teachers in the current curriculum with reference to two key areas, i.e. i) planning procedures and ii) teaching language as shown below.

When questioned about their teaching procedures, some teachers remarked that teaching starts with planning or taking up planning as an integral stage of teaching. In the following quotations, Leena and Iman are amongst other teachers who emphasise the stage of planning as a crucial phase in teaching procedures. Leena states, for instance:

I feel that my lesson starts when I prepare it. I prepare everything from drilling to acting, textbooks, cartoons, games, illustrations, songs, small acts, etc. [Leena/ Q3]

In a similar vein, Iman explains how she has developed her own planning practice after gaining some experience in teaching English:

Well, in the beginning I used to follow the text book plan until I was more oriented with the book, and the students' level in addition to the timing I am given. Now, I have my own planning which is not far different from the book's one. First of all, I decide on the objectives of the lesson; the exercises I use and the purposes of each. In fact, my plan is flexible because most of the time I change the plan according to the changes I have in the class during the lesson. [Iman/ In2]

Since any teaching activity or task requires careful planning, it could be said that teaching is one of the areas where planning forms a fundamental and vital part. It appears that planning forms an essential part of the actual teaching process and is very much an important and thought-out procedure on the part of the teachers here. As far as curriculum is concerned, planning remains a core activity whether exercised by policy makers or those who actually work in the field. Planning, therefore, operates at several levels and mediates between all of stakeholders. However, it requires thoughtful coordination and collaboration between all parties. In the Syrian EFL context, it appears that two discrete 'groups' exist: those of policy makers and those of teachers. It is also evident that the links between these groups are missing since teachers refer to their own intuition and their own personal beliefs as to 'what works' for their learners. This is to argue that the current curriculum does exist in a transient and fluctuated tradition of give and take between curriculum designers and those who execute these plans. In line with this argument, I contend that such relational tradition is natural for any curriculum to achieve its goals especially in centralised educational contexts like the Syrian one.

Teaching English as a foreign language requires specific teaching procedures, and the research literature and theories regarding EFL are both extensive and comprehensive. In this current study, the focus lies with interpreting participants' views about teaching English as a foreign language from the perspective of curriculum development.

As far as teaching language skills are concerned, educators often refer to the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as being the main elements in language acquisition. There exists a multitude of theories and specialised studies to deal with all of these skills or parts of them. For the purposes of this study these

skills are investigated from the perspective of curriculum. Rather than dealing with these skills individually, the teachers' views are evaluated regarding all of these skills collectively.

General themes can be recognised with the teachers' responses regarding their procedures for teaching language skills. These include: adopting a *learner-centred educational environment* by means of using tactics and procedures to increase learners' involvement and interaction in the learning process; emphasising the right for all learners to learn through using strategies of *inclusion rather than exclusion*; and finally following *new trends in language teaching* such as the use of communicative teaching methods and authentic role-play amongst others.

As to a learner-centered environment, Mariam remarks:

I always aim to keep my talk time to the minimum and provide opportunities for the learners to speak and work in pairs or in groups, which supports weaker students. [Mariam/ Q9]

Since learning a language requires practice, Hana is aware that probably one of the only chances for her students to use English is in the classroom and this fact encourages them to practice speaking as much as possible in her class. In fact, the issue of having little opportunity to practise speaking is often emphasised by many research studies concerning speaking (e.g. Sakale, 2012). With teachers like Hana, it is possible to observe the adoption of more updated language teaching trends, reflecting that Syrian teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the contemporary trends.

The involvement or inclusion of all learners presents another recurring theme in some teachers' responses. Kais and Asseel are among several others who emphasise engaging all of the students in their teaching activities. Kais, provides an example about how he works towards maximising students' engagement when introducing new vocabularies and terms:

I like to use engagement. For example, when teaching new vocabulary, I will question the class to see if anyone knows the definition. Once we have had some discussion about the definition (and subsequent alternate definitions and use for the word), I will write

it on the board so the students can see how it is spelled. I will then break down the word phonetically to ensure correct pronunciation and invite the students to use the word in different sentences with different meanings, correcting pronunciation and grammar throughout the process. [Kais/ In4]

The right for all to learn is an opinion which teachers appear to highlight in their worldviews. As it can be very challenging for curriculum designers to achieve inclusion for learners in the educational process, the findings appear to indicate that teachers at the Higher Institute of Languages are trying their best to achieve this. Therefore, teachers ought to be provided with the flexibility and means to meet individual needs and differences in order to fulfil the demands of inclusion. This effectively argues the case of inclusion being a vital element for any curriculum. Within the confines of the current Syrian curriculum it is not possible to find any written statement or intent regarding inclusion and yet we still find teachers are more than aware of the value of inclusion in teaching practice.

Another related theme to this is shown by the teachers' use of the language communicatively. This is demonstrated by Layan who comments:

Usually I stress teaching my students the communicative skills because I think this is what they need most from learning English. I use activities related to the material presented in the class, like role-playing, for instance. [Layan/ Q6]

There is a broad range of research regarding the description and application of innovative language teaching methods, which is widely available, and it should be incumbent upon educators to study these findings and apply what is suitable for their own particular teaching settings. In the current context, away from the official documents and constraints of the curriculum, teachers can demonstrate a forceful competence and practical working knowledge of the communicative method of teaching in EFL. This is to argue once more about the challenging performance of those teachers.

One of the key arguments in this current study regarding a theory of curriculum is centred upon one major imperative which is the building or advancing what could be referred to as a 'loose' curriculum, not in the negative sense of the word, but through

challenging all sorts of conservative, over-specified and centralised curriculum. In fact, I believe that in these modern and changing times inspire us all to disrupt and challenge the more static and normative documents and discourses, in all areas of education, with the curriculum being no exception.

5.2.2 Teaching materials

The teaching materials and their use are one of the essential themes at the heart of this study. The participant teachers have provided their views and comments about the current, prescribed materials that they are using in their language classes. There seemed to be a general sense of satisfaction in most of the responses. In the following section, the teachers give a detailed description and explanation of the textbook, the teacher book, the workbook, the supplementary materials, and the main issues that are related to their own practice regarding these teaching materials.

5.2.2.1 The textbook

Teaching materials and resources, in general, and textbooks, in particular can form the vital foundations for any EFL curriculum (Tikly, 2001). They are regularly considered the cornerstone from which teachers and educators initiate the first steps in approaching the process of teaching. They are also often considered as the link between the learners and the teachers, or as channels of communicating knowledge and learning to students. In the current context, the textbook(s) used at the Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus for teaching English is '*face2face*', designed by Chris Redston, Gillie Cunningham, and Jan Bell and published by Cambridge University Press. *Face2face* is a six-level general English course for adults and young adults.

Generally, most of the teachers appear to be satisfied with the textbooks they are using, but it seems that their views vary regarding certain parts. The main findings regarding the textbooks could be summarised as follows: Firstly, the textbook is a sort of a multi-skill text that provides guidance for the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Secondly, it is an overarching textbook in the sense that it provides general skills rather than specialised ones, which can be directed towards a specific type of learner. Thirdly, as some participants remark, the textbook

is old and out of date without the required variations to meet the learners' needs. Fourthly, in terms of theory, it follows the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Finally, although the CLT approach sometimes takes heed of the cultural differences of the targeted learners, some practitioners see the textbook as lacking in sufficient references to deeper societal and cultural issues. In this next section, some of representative quotes from the participants illustrate these latter points more clearly:

According to most of the teachers surveyed, the textbook acting as a sort of *general text*, constitutes a main theme, which emerged from the data. As such, it provides *general knowledge and topics*, *widens the scope*, and refers to the *various language skills*. Although these descriptions of the book were common among most of the teachers, they were put into context by the teachers.

Nisreen, for example, evaluates the textbook as follows:

The book is designed to teach general English (grammar, reading, listening, speaking and writing) ... I use the textbook as well as some extra activities to enhance it. The textbook (face2face) is structured well. The content is varied and mostly contains general interesting topics. [Nisreen/ Q2]

Equally, Hamza describes the textbook as follows:

The current materials used have a very wide scope and are at times challenging for the student. [Hamza/ Q16]

As it explicitly states, the available textbook is designed to teach general language skills, covering a wide variety of topics. For me this presents a view of seeing this central textbook as including key a variety of skills as well as sections on specific topics. This combination of elements for a programme might have been deliberately selected by those planners counting on this text to fulfil the course objectives, which like most language programmes emphasises a variety of skills and topics to meet a wide range of learners' interests. Nevertheless, for the desired learning outcomes, in the current context, a type of less specialised textbook might be a reasonable and alternative choice for introducing general language skills for learners seeking an (intermediate) level of second language acquisition. In most cases a variety of

different topics and reading materials is always an option that most book authors or publishers as well as educators feel to be suitable for teachers to be able to meet the needs of diverse learners in terms of their linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds, as well as their proficiency levels. Nisreen, in this extract, finds the textbook to be of interest to her students regarding this issue of a variety of tasks and topics.

However, other teachers see this wide variety of topics, generality, and lack of specialisation as shortcomings of the textbook which is used. They also find it to be boring, old fashioned and out of date. In fact, this *apparent* disparity in the teachers' views is an interesting one. While it seems that some teachers are satisfied with the textbook, others are less content when they consider the need for a more specialised and modern-day textbook that provides learners with skills according to new trends and methods of language teaching that tend to privilege specialisation.

Those who show dissatisfaction had the highest representation as compared to the satisfied ones. Both groups of teachers argue their views according to the perspective from which they judge and evaluate the textbook. Whilst the variety of topics is valid for meeting a wide range of learner backgrounds, the lack of specialisation in the textbook for different usages requires some teachers to seek out extra materials to fill in any gaps that the prescribed books leaves uncovered. As the findings show, the aspect of taking learners' needs into account has not been addressed by course designers and policy makers. The following demonstrates some of the teachers' opinions regarding this theme of generality versus specialisation:

[The textbook is] old and boring and not suitable for the needs of Syrian students. [Layan/ Q6]

The books we teach [from] are designed for different levels. We don't choose. Although they are okay in general, sometimes for certain levels we find ourselves as teachers obliged to substitute some reading texts with more efficient and enjoyable ones. [Sana/ Q7]

In addition to the opinions given here about the prescribed materials both Layan and Sana provide us with further feedback as to the issue of the suitability of the textbook.

Sana combines two crucial elements of the curriculum itself; the learners and the textbook they study. Furthermore, she comments that the book does not meet any variation in the learners' levels, which forces her to supplement the book with other materials. There appears to be an extremely wide gap between what policy makers believe to be the potential input that they can bring to learners' hearts and minds and the learners' *actual* needs represented by those practitioners who are in fact much closer to those learners. In addition to this, Sana makes her feelings about the textbook clearly evident by her remark: '*we don't choose*'. This, once more, places both the teachers and the learners in the same position of marginalisation with lack of agency. These observations raise the issue that the current curriculum in Syria could be viewed as being fundamentally flawed in that its planners are neither in line with, nor fully aware of all the contemporary and up-to-date possibilities and opportunities that can be offered to other twenty-first century learners who seek learning at whatever cost. This issue is explored further in the next section.

5.2.2.2 New Trends in Education

Other themes raised by the teachers when discussing the textbook include: discrepancies or lack of meaningful links between the different attainment levels, a disregard for the relevant cultural aspects, and a lack of encouragement and development of critical thinking skills. Although their comments cover many different issues leading to many threads of argument, the themes are addressed collectively here under the overarching theme of the lack of awareness of and lack of access to new trends in education, dealing such subjects as the continuity and compatibility together with the inclusiveness and integrity of learning skills.

As the following excerpts demonstrate, these elements are deemed as missing from the current textbook. For example, Yumna comments that:

Nowadays we teach Face2Face series which is based on CLT. Some levels are suitable for our learners such as the pre-intermediate and intermediate. However, the upper-intermediate is not because the students can't relate to the topics presented. [Yumna/ Q13]

Additionally, Iman elaborates further by stating that:

Face2face aims at teaching some grammatical points that aren't commonly used or heard. It's true that we have lots of speaking activities there but these ignore our culture and so students don't feel motivated enough to participate in class discussions. [Iman/ In2]

Omar also mentions a further problem inherent in the textbook:

One problem with the book is that reading texts are very simple and the comprehension questions are based on copying the answers directly from the text. So, they don't enhance student's critical thinking's skills. [Omar/ Q21]

When starting with the issue of the lack of culturally relevant elements, the data analysis reveals the high value for the teachers of considering the key cultural aspects when reflecting upon and planning the adoption or development of, or change to a curriculum. This is especially pertinent in the current time and context of the study when everything is characterised by uncertainty and chaos, and in which new forms of social and political conflicts, and identities are emerging. In this regard, the issue of the importance and centrality of culture in the educational context becomes especially important in maintaining the balance of the learning and teaching processes. Moreover, it could be argued that culture is one of the most discussed, researched and even contested aspect of language learning and teaching. The statements made by Yumma, Iman, and Omar just indicate how the prescribed textbook has ignored the cultural aspects of Syrian students in classroom settings. For instance, unsuitability of the materials, lack of motivation, and lack of critical thinking are all perceived as being present. This lack of awareness at administrative and management levels results in teachers often paying less attention to the selection of teaching materials which are more culturally appropriate for their learners. The thesis thus encourages local teachers to be involved in the development of their own curriculum and teaching materials.

The lack of continuity and integrity of the textbooks and the different levels of learners presents another concern. Analysis of data reveals evidence regarding the value of the continuation of the teaching materials that coincides with the growth of learners in their learning process.

Yara's words point to her perception of a lack of consistency with the textbook, as well as her criticism of the assessment sections, which do not reflect accurately the learners' acquired skills and attainment throughout the progression of the sections.

I teach grammar, reading comprehension, and conversational English... All chapters in the curriculum we use are similar in format. This format is quite tedious to teach and even more the student does not participate as the topics are not coherent. Additionally, each chapter increases in difficulty and, in theory, builds on the chapter before it. Also, the assessments used for student placement do not reflect the student's ability to perform in the given curriculum; since key parameters which should be used are not incorporated. [Yara/In5]

According to this view, the problem that teachers face while teaching this textbook intersects with the needs, types, and levels of the targeted learners. For Yara, the so-called tediousness and lack of coherence as well as the lack of key parameters of the textbooks appear to cause a lack of positive interaction on the part of the learners. This contributes to there being no flow of positivity between the two vital components of the curriculum, i.e. the teachers and the learners. Furthermore, there appears to be dissatisfaction and disappointment on the part of the teachers, reflecting a working environment where the two major stakeholders (learners and teachers) lack an active role or the agency to work with hope and motivation. This can in turn lead to the whole educational process appearing dysfunctional.

5.2.2.3 Workbook, teachers' book, and supplementary materials

As far as the teaching materials are concerned, the teachers have offered their opinions about other related teaching materials besides the textbook. These materials include the workbook (WB), the teachers' book (TB), and assorted supplementary materials (SM). The teachers' views regarding these other materials complement their thoughts about the textbook.

A general theme concerning these materials is the perception that these materials are not adequate enough to achieve the required learning skills. Several teachers have indicated that they resort to finding or designing their own resources to compensate for this inadequacy. However, some teachers insist on adhering to the

given teaching materials. These particular teachers justify this practice as a strategy which avoids bearing the responsibility of any potential or desired change. The following section elaborates further on these two differing viewpoints regarding WB, TB and SM.

In these current constantly-changing times, textbooks are no longer the main source of teaching and learning that they were. With the overwhelming and fast-growing spread of diverse teaching and learning materials, teachers find themselves obliged to move beyond a specified prescription of certain forms of knowledge to introduce to their learners. They often seek out extra teaching materials to fulfil the growing demands of their learners. This is apparent in the current study. The following quotations demonstrate that several teachers use extra teaching materials:

Sana uses some materials to substitute certain texts in the textbook so as to create more interest and motivation amongst the students:

In general, it's okay, but sometimes for certain levels we find ourselves as teachers obliged to substitute some reading texts with more efficient and enjoyable ones. [Sana/ Q7]

Likewise, for Ramia, supplementary materials are used to support low level students in her classes:

I use other materials to illustrate or expand on certain points which could be difficult to low students. [Ramia/ Q4]

In the same way, Samar has her own teaching approach and categorisation of materials for every level she teaches, based on her extensive teaching experience:

Having taught the same levels for a while now, I have my own files. Each file contains materials for a level. My files mainly contain video clips. I have also collected some materials online and I build activities on them to substitute some boring exercises in the book as I told you before, materials like ads, stories, maps, newspaper articles, etc. After having some experience of teaching the same levels, I know now when is the best time to use each without writing a plan beforehand. [Samar/ In1]

The principle reason behind the teachers' need for extra teaching materials seems to be the necessity for those teachers to fill in the gaps of the provided textbook. It

could be argued that the teachers feel the need to go beyond the prescribed textbook with more relevant resources to help them in their teaching.

Some other teachers, however, perceive commitment to the provided teaching materials as a refuge from bearing responsibility. Mariam, for example, prefers to adhere to the 'curriculum' because it makes her feel secure and she can abdicate responsibility:

Usually I tend to stick to the curriculum since I'll be held responsible for what my students have learned throughout the course. [Mariam/ Q9]

This viewpoint somewhat depicts the nature of work environment that some teachers experience in this research project. In educational contexts, like the current one, teachers could be perceived as the most vulnerable group of people in that they are often denied agency, voice, and the opportunity to make an active contribution to their own careers. In his seminal work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', (1989) Paolo Freire reminds us that teachers as well as students can also be seen as being oppressed, because they are regularly denied the agency that enables them to access the knowledge to feel competent and comfortable in their own classrooms.

5.2.2.4 Assessment and evaluation

Assessment constitutes another important aspect of the EFL curriculum in the current Syrian context. The teachers have provided a wide range of responses regarding assessment techniques they use to maximise achievement of the learning aims and objectives. These responses can be grouped under various sub-topics including evaluation of the teaching process and needs analyses.

Generally, Leena draws attention to some of the means whereby students are assessed:

Assessment in my classes is continuous through assessing my students' performance, their talk, homework, pair work, group work, participation, in addition to the regular pop-up quizzes. [Leena/ Q3]

Similarly, Bayan explains about the importance of assessment:

Assessment is ongoing in class to determine if students understand the concept being presented, by asking the students to create their own sentences in their own contexts or by my formal means of quizzes and tests. [Bayan/ Q12]

It is clear that the teachers emphasise on-going or continuous assessment. They employ this technique to help students advance in their skills through the assessment sections. Others refer to the use of various assessment techniques in addition to doing continuous assessment (e.g. quizzes, summative tests, homework, spelling tests, grammar drills, etc.). With regards to the curriculum these techniques should form an essential part of the design and development of any curriculum. Teachers are aware of the value of assessment and consequently take special care to use a variety of techniques to meet the individual differences and needs of their learners. Curriculum designers and planners as well are increasingly paying more attention to issues around assessment. They mostly place assessment at the centre of the teaching and learning process, in the belief that assessment plays a substantial role in learning and they advocate the use of a variety of these techniques, including continuous assessment. Assessment is taken up as an inclusive daily or weekly activity to enhance learning outcomes in the Syrian context, according to the teachers.

5.2.3 Evaluating the teaching process

Teachers' evaluation of their own teaching is one of the topics included in the discourse about teaching procedures and professional development. With the assumption that evaluation is an integral part of the curriculum those responses reflecting aspects of curriculum development through teaching evaluation, including self-reflection and peer evaluation are presented below:

5.2.3.1 Self-reflection

Reflexivity or self-evaluation is a process through which practitioners attain professional development in their careers. Some of the participant teachers are aware of this when they emphasise the need for continuous self-evaluation:

I ask for student's feedback informally and do self-evaluation after each and every lesson to see what weaknesses and strengths [there] were in my lesson, so that I develop the good things and avoid repeating the mistakes in my teaching in the following lessons. [Nadia/ Q1]

The main purpose of self-observation in teaching evaluation is to assist language teachers to 'construct' and 'reconstruct' their own knowledge about teaching (Gebhard, 2005). Nadia makes significant attempts to identify problems in her language teaching and explore alternatives, whilst she builds upon awareness of her own teaching for the sake of professional development. Self-evaluation is a useful approach to teaching evaluation. However, there is a tendency in literature to support the notion of 'collaboration' in teaching evaluation for more effective language teaching (Barfield *et al.*, 2002; Lida, 2009).

5.2.3.2. Peer evaluation

The teacher also draw attention to *peer* evaluation as another aspect of teaching evaluation for maintaining professional development. Peer evaluation is usually conducted between two teachers where one teaches and the other observes the class. After that, both teachers discuss the sequence of the observed lesson, its strengths and weaknesses, and what recommendations they have for a better teaching in the next lessons (Harmer, 2001) based on their knowledge of the various issues they are used to encountering in their own language classes. Peer evaluation is especially important for novice teachers as it provides those teachers with the chance of observing other language classes and receiving feedback about theirs from their colleagues in a collaborative and friendly manner (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006). It also helps teachers to explore several possibilities for their own teaching and expand their knowledge of teaching (Lida, 2009, p. 58). For example, Ammar's remark about his experience of peer observation as a novice teacher is notable:

Sometimes we conduct [a] kind of informal peer observation to evaluate our teaching where we can discuss it with others and learn from other teachers' experiences. This kind of observation helped me a lot to develop my performance especially when I first started teaching. [Ammar/ Q18]

For me, peer evaluation, in this context, like in many other similar contexts, is a very useful technique for evaluating the teaching process itself as long as it is conducted in a non-judgemental manner. As previously discussed the data reveal that the teachers have expressed a sense of dissatisfaction and resistance to many procedures received from those who are higher than them within the educational hierarchy, and to those directives which are conducted in a top-down manner. It is very important then, that those teachers observing each other's lessons should be of equal power (Harmer, 2001), so as to avoid creating any bad relationship or a tense atmosphere between them. Finally, teachers also highlight that their teaching is evaluated by their students, from the outcomes or any associated feedback:

Evaluation can be [done] by yourself, but student progress and success rate is the best evaluation. [Bahaa/ Q15]

I normally evaluate my teaching techniques through my students' performance and absorbing the language skill. Not to forget other personnel who observe your classes such as, my colleagues at the Institute. [Kais/ In4]

Whether done by the teachers themselves or by their students, evaluation remains an integral part of curriculum. In curriculum design, planners should create enough space for evaluation by allotting time or strategies to enable teachers actualise self-development through evaluation. It should, however, be left to the teachers themselves to select suitable strategies to ensure their own professional development. According to the teachers' views, evaluation is perceived as an essential part of their teaching career.

5.2.3.3. Reacting to learners' needs

In recent years, the subject of learners' needs analysis has become one of the most discussed topics in educational research; it includes discussions around pedagogical and curricular practices that prioritise the learners' various needs as being at the centre of the learning process. In curriculum theory, in particular, the issue of needs analysis has generated considerable interest into how to understand these needs and how to respond to them. The ultimate aims for these revisionary projects are generally to maintain resolution and success with learners or to

understand the actual needs as the learners themselves perceive them (Nation & Macalastair, 2010). Reacting to learners' needs is usually thought to be an assessment of the students' requirements leading to a considered and meaningful application of them in practice. In response to questions about needs analysis, the teachers have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the various ways of appreciating and responding to learners' needs. They refer to topics such as: a) individual variations of learners; b) learners' inclination towards smart phones and technology, and c) innovative ways of grouping learners. These are elaborated upon below.

The use of extra materials and class activities which differentiate between learners are amongst several techniques the teachers highlight in their attempts to meet learners' individual needs. Ramia, for example, resorts to extra materials to facilitate the inclusion of weaker students or of students who perform at a lower level than their peers. Ramia comments:

I use other materials to illustrate or expand [up]on certain points which could be difficult to low students. [Ramia/ Q4]

In addition to trying to consistently include learners with academically lower performance levels, Layan speaks of using such activities to teach the required skills to *all* learners:

I try to make the class activities as diverse as possible so that I can cover everything the students need. [Layan/ Q6]

This demonstrates teachers' generally constructive and facilitative attitude towards their learners. One interpretation from the data of the teachers' very active role in the differentiation of the learners could be that, although teachers are subject to a bureaucratic and centralised educational tradition in Syria, such roles express an implicit challenge to this educational tradition and *status quo*. Sana's response alludes to this:

I try to dedicate some time to every learner, but even this can be hard in large classes. [Sana/ Q7]

It is clear that Sana is a dedicated teacher who cares deeply for all the learners in her class. Such attempts at inclusion and differentiation are, however, not free from logistic constraints such as large numbers of learners in classrooms. Nevertheless, although such logistical problems might add to the obstacles teachers face, they appear to remain positive and capable of coping with the challenges they encounter.

In the same vein, Yara and Rami's comments accentuate the perception of educators as those whose responsibility is to understand each learner's individual needs and respond to them accordingly. Course management and differentiation alongside the use of visual and audio materials could be considered as some of the more advanced responses to learners needs. Differentiation in itself is of notable importance as teachers gradually understand that learners' 'multiple intelligences' represent a cornerstone for meeting learners' diverse needs. This can lead to the argument that curriculum theory has 'infinite' aspects that include all singularities of the education process.

Although to some extent the written documentation for the current curriculum and the planning policy could be seen as failing to meet the ever-changing demands of learners, the teachers, as an integral part of the curriculum structure, should be the ones who can bring about change and resolution. By assuming a mediatory role between the documentation, the administration and the learners, teachers become the linchpin that facilitates the advancement of education through the curriculum. In the current context and in light of the previously discussed findings regarding the marginalisation of these teachers, it is reasonable to surmise that teachers assume the major role in the curriculum.

Yara makes the following claim:

I try as much as possible to vary the way I teach them and I try to bring extracurricular activities that respond to their needs. I also give them the space to participate in managing their course and direct[ing] it to satisfy their needs. [Yara/ In5]

With regard to reacting to learners' needs, Rami explains as follows:

I use a variety of methods to appeal to students' varying learning needs including: auditory, experiential, visual, etc. Use of smart boards, white boards, recordings and the like are helpful but I have found the best tool is to develop a positive and engaging relationship with the students in the class based on respect and a desire to learn English and enjoy the process. [Rami/ Q14]

In addition to varying the teaching and learning techniques, the teachers respond to individual difference by using innovative techniques including: a) alternating between auditory and visual techniques; b) using technology and computer-assisted learning and smart phones; c) using pacing in terms of introducing skills and d) clustering or grouping (and re-grouping) learners to achieve the desired learning outcome. These techniques represent a remarkable advancement in meeting learners' needs that is in keeping with the ever-developing and changing world.

Samar demonstrates an all-encompassing and reflective approach to addressing and responding to the requirements and needs of learners. She uses a multitude of techniques and strategies at personal (interpersonal), physiological and material levels, including providing advice and encouragement, in order for learners to perform challenging tasks. She also encourages them to use mobile or smart phones for fast communication as well as 'apps' to enhance learning processes.

There are different things. I mainly give them advice and ways to improve their English. For those who need writing, I encourage them to write some extra assignments and keep a journal in English if they want. I provide them with some topics to encourage them to write. Also, I assign my students a set of five graded readers at the beginning of each course to read during the course. I tell them that this helps improve their reading and vocabulary so students who want to speed [up] their reading or improve their vocabulary can do this. For speaking, I ask those who want to improve their speaking to record their speech using their mobile phones and listen to themselves and repeat it many times. They sometimes send me these recordings via Bluetooth for feedback. I provide them with a set of questions to motivate them to do it. [Samar/ In1]

Several other teachers like Firass and Leena also describe the use of various teaching and learning techniques, such as mixing learners of low and high level performance: using multiple and single clustering, and pairing.

Firass, for example, discusses the necessity of providing students with low level performance with extra activities to assist them in developing their language abilities, in addition to integrating such students with their peers with more advanced English language skills. He explains:

The teacher must be aware of the individual differences between students; therefore, low level students must [be] give[n] extra homework and questions to encourage them to practise English. As for in-class practice, I usually put strong students with weak students and let them help each other. I also try to have easy and difficult activities in every class to help weak students and challenge strong students. I give all students homework every day. [Firass/ Q24]

The idea of mixing students of different levels together is also highlighted by Leena as a possible way to address the different students' level within the same class. She states:

In classes with different levels I usually use multiple clustering (different levels at the same group/pair) and single clustering (similar levels at the same group/pair) with more attention to weaker students that depends on the level, material, component, number of students, etc. [Leena/ Q3]

With these views in mind, it might be suggested that it must be possible to provide both a general and inclusive conceptualisation and description of the curriculum, which goes beyond just supplying written materials or texts. In other words, the human role becomes an essential part of any curriculum designed to meet desired learning outcomes including the needs of learners. Although the teaching materials, according to the participants of the study, fell far below their expectations, the teachers adapt their own roles to compensate for these shortcomings. This indicates that it is possible that the human factor is the only real promoter of change and resolution in any given curriculum. Since teachers and learners constitute the two central human components in the curriculum, they become the vital factors in dealing with the demands of an ever-changing world. This is especially evident in the teachers' inclination towards the use of technology: smart phones, in particular, in order to meet these changes.

Meeting the demands of a changing world remains at the core of fulfilling learners' needs. Learners' needs are not part of a static and clear entity, but are less visible and fully dynamic: in constant flux and change. This must in turn compel educators as well as curriculum designers to pay more attention to and expend more effort in exploring and understanding the ever-changing nature of learners' needs. Equally there follows an imperative to devise strategies and techniques for meeting these changes. In this regard, both the teacher and the learners can provide us with the means for a deeper understanding as they are generally the main foci in the educational process. In order to bring about meaningful change, both groups must be placed at the heart of any eventual process or system in the Syrian context.

Through a cross-sectional reading of these findings, particularly those related to policy makers and teachers' in-classroom practices, some discrepancy between the two 'cultures' is apparent. On the one hand, by assuming a high position in the hierarchy of the educational system, and by virtue of detaching themselves from direct contact with what happens in the classroom and with learners' needs, policy makers, as the ones who take decisions regarding curriculum, may sometimes provide a negative image of the current nature of the Syrian EFL curriculum. In their choice of prescribed teaching materials and their strategy-planning, they may appear to fail to keep abreast of the nature and needs of today's learners. However, when turning to the picture as viewed from the standpoint of the teachers and learners, who hold a far less advantaged and privileged position in this hierarchy, but who are the real actors in the 'scene', the image proves to be much more promising and encouraging. This is to argue that in the current context curricula is a 'loose' concept, only understood by operating a holistic view of the myriad elements that constitute the curriculum.

5.2.3.4 Learners' different styles

Addressing students' individual learning style provides another theme which has emerged from the teachers' views. Several teachers emphasise the fact that learners have different learning styles, and that they provide their own techniques of dealing with them. Muhammad's, Rami's, and Hamza's views, all compound this concept. For example, Muhammad states:

I try to incorporate as many different styles as possible, from listening activities to visual effects to help minimize any problems or boredom that may occur over the period of a course. [Muhammad/ Q20]

Rami also highlights the necessity of using various styles of teaching for the benefit of students:

Not each student will learn in the same way. So, by varying the technique throughout the lesson the instructor is sure to assist each student in grasping the information. [Rami/ Q14]

Hamza agrees with Muhammad and Rami in justifying the need for a multi-learning style of approach in the Syrian context, where this is not commonplace or present in the curriculum. This is indicated in the statement below:

Although I agree that students may be visual or audio in their learning styles I do feel that there is lack of support to incorporate this into the curriculum. The books used also are sometimes perceived as 'one-size-fits-all'. [Hamza/ Q16]

As is apparent the teachers are very aware of the fact that not all students learn the same way. The application of such an understanding remains one of the crucial factors for meeting the students' various styles of learning. Several teachers refer to students alternating between auditory, visual and bodily-kinaesthetic among others. As far as the curriculum is concerned, an understanding of learning styles is vital to the pedagogical strategies that guide curriculum planning and design. For the current context, teachers demonstrate awareness of different types of learners, resonating with Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences theory and the thinking of constructivists in terms of how learners vary in their acquisition of skills and knowledge. For the particular interest of this study, it is proposed that part of curriculum design requires a wide understanding and much attention being paid to this area, whether at the levels of planning, devising teaching materials, and or in teachers' training programmes.

5.3 EFL teachers' challenges with materials:

5.3.1 Implementation challenges

Analysis of the research data, i.e. the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended questionnaire, reveals some variation with regards to EFL teachers' attitudes about the key obstacles and challenges they encounter while implementing their materials in the classroom. Each of the teachers has his/ her own unique story about the difficulties they face in their classes while using such materials. These views can be categorised into four main emergent themes: a) rigid administrative rules; b) time barriers; c) lack of motivation; and d) misplaced students.

5.3.1.1 Rigid administrative rules

Management plays a crucial role and is at the centre of any good administrative system, including that of educational institutions. A comprehensive and well-working administration system with a good management structure lies at the heart of being able to achieve the goals and objectives any organisation aims to achieve. More specifically, it could be claimed, as inferred from data, that good management practice can lead to optimum prospects and success for an educational institution, whereas bad management practice can just as likely lead to limiting such potential, even if other elements in that institution were proved to be effective. The effect of management on the implementation process is also clearly apparent in the study. Analysis of data obtained about the teachers' views reveals that a considerable number of teachers believe that the management system has affected their classroom practices and the implementation of the curriculum in many ways. The data reveal a number of issues related to the implementation of course materials. One example of such issues is that 'top-down instructions' (including for the working with the materials; the prescribed pace and time management and the lack of clarity in instructions, etc.) are considered to be prevalent in some administrative practices. Unsatisfactory management in the process of learning appears to be one of the major obstacles confronting teachers whilst dealing with the course materials. Bayan, for example, observes:

Some students do not take the courses seriously thus not giving it the time and attention it deserves. However, this is a problem in administration as well and does not lie solely with the students. One of the main barriers is that the curriculum is not born of the students

and often will not hold much interest for them as they have [had] no part in creating it. [Bayan/ Q12]

Although the problem of lack of seriousness on the part of the students seems to be related to the students themselves, Bayan thinks that the essence of the problem lies with the administration itself and its inadequate management rather than any other factor. She emphasises the fact that there are some problems with the 'curriculum' itself, which can be attributed to the management failure to meet the students' needs and expectations when 'creating' the materials. There appears to be few if any international studies about this particular topic along with how course materials and curricula are adapted to and mediated by students' needs in specific local contexts. However, Bayan raises a pertinent issue here, '*curriculum is not born of the students...*'. This could indicate that the selection and dissemination or, more precisely imposition of certain curricula could be detrimental to both teachers and students. In a similar vein, the strictness of rules and their application is perceived as a major obstacle regarding teachers' creativity. Ramia speaks of such rules which hinder her creativity in her own class causing one of the major challenges she has in her class:

I think one of the main challenges that we have in our classes is an external one. It is related to the rigid administrative rules and so no freedom is given for the teacher to experiment or be creative in his/her classroom! [Ramia/ Q4]

Several participants emphasise issues related to the centrality of curriculum implementation. Some related issues include the lack of flexibility; how things are organised; the ambiguity of instructions amongst others. In such educational conditions and settings, both students and teachers are perceived as lacking agency. In other words, they are taken up as passive recipients of an external vision imposed on them. This point is further confirmed by Yasser:

We have this problem of the management being not flexible most of the time. Sometimes also the orders given to the teachers appear to lack organisation and seem to hold lots of ambiguity for us. [Yasser/ Q19]

Aziz also states:

I think management needs to be more organised and clearer with their objectives and what they expect from their teachers and then provide them with the freedom to accomplish those goals. [Aziz/ Q17]

Many EFL studies highlight the importance of classroom management as a vital component for a positive classroom climate which facilitates the ultimate effectiveness of EFL learning and teaching (i.e. Duke, 1982). However, the study data, exemplified by Bayan, Ramia, Yasser, and Aziz's, turns the focus on the policy makers as being the only active agents in the educational process. For these teachers, the unyielding administrative rules seem to inhibit and prevent them achieving the desired teaching environment, thus affecting any effective implementation of the materials. It seems to be that the only focus is on management entailing administrators to hold the primary role for establishing an environment for a better learning and teaching rather than teachers being responsible for managing the class.

5.3.1.2 Time constraints

Time constraints present another emergent theme revealed by the data. Teachers view time as a major hindrance when using their course materials; they contend that the time allocated for the courses is not enough to cover all the chapters in the book. The issue of problems with time is emphasised in many of the responses. The following quotation, for example, demonstrates some of the teachers' views of the effect of time on their teaching practice. In this respect, Yara comments:

Sometimes I find it difficult to cover all the pages in the units of the textbook in my classes. This most of the time leaves me with two choices; either to skip some of the pages or to reduce the amount of activities where the latter just turns my class into a boring one. I think if we got more time for every course, we could make some additions and thus be more creative when planning our classes. [Yara/ In5]

As can be inferred from Yara's response allocating sufficient time for coverage of the course materials appears to be crucial in decision-making regarding their implementation. It is left to teachers' own intuition to decide whether to delete some of the material or reduce the required focus on the targeted skills. In both cases, such a dilemma on the part of teachers can negatively affect the desired learning

outcomes. In this regard this point is related to the previous theme of centrality because the lack of active participation on the part of teachers can produce such problems. Time and its effect inside the classes, and especially when the teacher has to cover lots of pages in a limited time is a vital issue. This focus on the quantitative style of presentation of the materials is also a result of the administrative rules that oblige the teacher to finish the whole set of materials within the time limits. Such kind of rules place the teacher under considerable pressure, which can, in many cases, diminish the teacher's interest in the materials, especially when it effects the use and quantity of communicative activities that facilitate an atmosphere of enthusiasm and motivation in the classroom.

The problem with time is also mentioned by Alaa, who suggests learning outside of the classroom as a possible solution to this issue. Additionally, time pressure causes her to attempt inappropriate or unsuitable' teaching practices or at least practices with which she is not entirely satisfied:

We have to finish certain pages in a specific time. This forces us to do things that we don't like, for example, follow just certain activities, orders, sometimes use Arabic, etc., or sometimes we do it in the form of homework or tests which means extra time from us for correction.
[Alaa/ Q5]

Using out of class activities as a possible solution to overcoming the problem of time pressure in language classes, is also one suggested by several other participants. Such suggestions focus on learning as a process which continues outside the classroom, often in the form of homework, tests, research, etc. In this case, the teachers appear to believe that classroom time is only sufficient to control the process and ensure that the process of knowledge transfer moves forward and that the students should depend and rely on themselves to learn the language.

Alaa also raises the issue of using Arabic in classes when there is not enough time to use English for explanation. It could be claimed that the use of Arabic in classes diminishes the quality of English language classes as it decreases the number of opportunities for more English practice, which could in turn be said to result in non-effective classes reflected in the learner outcomes. Equally, it could be argued that teachers in this case should pay more efforts to creating a classroom environment

where Arabic is not allowed to be used by either the teacher or the learners. In this regard, Nadia explains that she has overcome the barrier of time limitation to some degree in her classroom:

At first, I thought time was not enough for one course but then with practice I found out that I can control that. I do not allow my students to use Arabic at all and I give them enough time to express themselves in English. As they say: 'Nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely'. [Nadia/ Q1]

5.3.1.3 Lack of motivation

Lack of motivation or even 'de-motivation' is another emergent theme that the data reveal. Several participants perceive *themselves* as lacking in motivation and the capacity to be assertive in their professional lives, which tends to inhibit their success. The narrative about the teachers in the current context seems to be an unhappy and unsatisfactory one; with their stories often revealing how they are placed in a position of being mere tools for applying regulations and orders, especially when these rules are disparate with their own beliefs. This can result in there being a lack of inspiration and motivation, which can turn such teachers into simply 'employees' and not professionals, and into people who perform with minimal effort in their teaching careers. One of key main challenges here lies in creating a stimulating learning environment as being and staying motivated is one of the most important steps toward achieving what is required from the language course. The teachers in the study have attributed the reasons behind being de-motivated to many factors such as: having boring materials; the students' unwillingness to study, and/ or a general lack of interest amongst the teachers and the students themselves. The following highlights some of the teachers' responses in this respect. Ghufraan states, for example:

I usually find that if the student is not motivated enough to study, this can lead to problems with the final outcome. Lack of motivation might be due to some aspects like having irrelevant topics and uncommon expressions and difficult grammatical rules (the ones that don't exist in the mother language are considered to be [the most] difficult). [Ghufraan/ Q10]

Bayan also encapsulates the importance of maintaining students' interest:

In a word, boring! Keeping interest is one of the greatest challenges, given the current materials. Motivation of students is a big factor, and lack of it prevents progress in achieving aims. [Bayan/ Q12]

Likewise, Yumna expresses her views in this regard:

I think having de-motivated students, boring textbooks and topics, and boring teachers is our main challenge. Sometimes the topics of the texts are not interesting enough or the content would not serve the objectives they have in mind. [Yumna/ Q13]

5.3.1.4 Incorrectly placed students

Placing learners at the incorrect level is another emergent theme that can put obstacles in the way of the eventual success of the course and the effectiveness of teaching practice. Teachers' responses allude to a combination of 'misplaced students' (i.e. students who are in their classes but cannot follow what is being taught according to the level), and those of 'mixed-abilities'. This was referred to by the responses of six of the participants. In this instance, in the current teaching settings, problems appear to be caused by the teachers struggling to know which parts of the materials should be followed, and those which could be missed out or ignored, in order to correspond to the learners' academic levels. Sometimes the solution does not even rest in the hands of the teachers because there are so many other external factors that have an impact upon decisions about students' placement. There also are some concerns from both parents and society in general that this could be something that interferes with the educational process. Some teachers complain that some students seem to belong to a different level than the one they are teaching, and consequently they have the challenge of coping within a multi-level class. In this regard, Layan says, for example:

I think one of the main challenges that we might experience in our classes is when the combination of students is not coherent or it is a mixed ability classroom. This might lead to other challenges that are not less in importance such as, students that are: not ready to learn; too stressed or too careless. [Layan/ Q6]

The issue of misplacement appears to preoccupy several other participants. Hamza, for example, speaks of the challenges that he has to overcome to achieve the

learning goals. According to him, catering to and ensuring that students pass tests that enable them to transfer into higher classes, is not enough to ensure successful learning outcomes in a more advanced class. However, as the regulations state that whoever passes these tests should be upgraded to a higher level, Hamza and others have to comply with these regulations. Once again this resides with the issue of centrality of the administration, because these tests are prepared and administered by a higher level of more remotely-located people, who rarely have direct contact with students and classroom activities. Additionally, meaningful learners' needs analysis is absent in the bureaucratic preparation of such tests.

The case of Hamza and other teachers alike is an important and illustrative one, as once again the teachers are left to their own intuition to overcome the problem of the misplacement of students. In a context that lacks consistent and flexible regulations, the margin of success can be perceived as being very limited. Furthermore, this problem demonstrates one of the major shortcomings in the issue of implementation of the course materials. Hamza states in this regard:

Misplaced students who are in the wrong group are definitely my challenge!! I agree that they have passed all tests at the lower level before being upgraded to the level I am teaching but still I do not think they fit in with my class. Sometimes when I feel that they are not making progress like their colleagues, I encourage them to pay more efforts to improve themselves but I cannot tell them to go back to a lower level. [Hamza/ Q16]

Related to the problem of 'misplacement' is the fact that the current educational system, at least in its formal guise, does not encourage learning outside the classroom, or even group learning. Teachers facing such challenges have to build strong interpersonal relationships to encourage their students to follow the international trends of an 'open learning environment' that is not centralised completely on the teachers.

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to raise the issue of ICT-based learning as a solution to some of these problems. As Iman observes, alongside more interactive classroom activities such as peer and group work, she also encourages students to engage with 'virtual learning settings'. This, however, remains far from efficient since

curriculum design lacks any meaningful consideration or inclusion of ICT or other computer-based learning.

Building up a good relationship with students is very important when teachers are striving for successful outcomes. That is, establishing a good rapport between teachers and learners may increase the students' trust in their teachers. Similarly, designing/ implementing some communicative activities in class can help to overcome this obstacle of multi-level classes and to reduce the gap in language performance abilities between students. This is well-expressed by Iman's opinion of the mixed-ability classes:

The students' different levels might cause some problems sometimes and the students' different purposes. But they are not very big challenges as I try my best to overcome them. Pair and group work help me a lot to overcome the different levels inside the class. In addition to the individual work at home those who are really interested in improving their language and feel that they are weaker at language than their colleagues are willing to work hard at home through using the internet. As for different purposes, I try to change the materials I give out as much as possible. [Iman/ In2]

5.3.2 Challenges to professional development

Professional development is a concept that has been of major interest over the past three decades in extended disciplinary fields, and education is no exception. My data reveal that the notion of professional development presents a central concern to the participants of the study. They sometimes believe that the success of achieving their educational aims is held back, because they lack in-service training and lifelong learning regarding any new trends with their subject matter and related areas such as the use of technology. This emergent theme could be divided into sub-themes including: teacher autonomy in class; the challenge of training, and the challenge of technology.

5.3.2.1 Teacher autonomy

The concept of 'teacher autonomy' is a central theme that has emerged in many of the EFL teachers' responses here. Teachers seem to be very aware of the necessity

of their autonomy in the actual process of their own professional development, both as teachers and/ or as learners. However, for most of the teachers this autonomy, whether individually or collaboratively, seems difficult to attain in the current context. Teachers can believe that they are losing control over their own teaching in the classroom, which can lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction regarding such unattainable autonomy is demonstrated in the following in several ways.

The teachers appear to believe that they are not given the chance to be as creative as they would like to be and which would also lead to genuine reflection about their own practice in their classroom. They tend to see this as a barrier against developing themselves professionally from their own experiences. Although not stated explicitly by the participants, this could be further attributed to other psychological, social, and/or some work factors, as inferred from their responses.

As for the psychological factors; some teachers have mentioned some of the issues that have influenced their autonomy, such as being stressed all the time during the course of teaching, partly because of their inability to break the top-down rules that are set for them to follow inside their classes. For those teachers, these rules hinder them from reflecting upon their own teaching in an objective manner where their practices could be evaluated from different angles and perspectives. This also has the impact of having a group of unmotivated teachers not bringing any new creative ideas to the forefront during their teaching and thus placing an obstacle in front of the advancement of more effective teaching to enhance the learners' outcomes. One example of psychological factors being a challenge to teacher autonomy is given by Sana. She states:

The top-down professional development is very poor which is also reflected in teachers own de-motivation. [Sana/ Q7]

In the same context, Aziz also pinpoints that having autonomous teachers might contribute to more effective and creative teaching. However, any such training courses appear to be largely irrelevant to teachers' actual needs in the classrooms, and the lack of autonomy does not allow them to bring about and action what they have been trained to do. For me, I realise that such 'training' courses provide another

example of the lack of agency on the part of the teachers, in them not being allowed to have an input in these courses, and consequently are not then motivated to apply them in their teaching practices. In fact, as some other participants observe, most of these courses in themselves are problematical, for reasons related to their timing and a lack of meaningful relationship between their desired output and the teachers' needs. As such most of these training courses seem to remain effective only in theory. Aziz observes:

There are workshops offered from time to time. The challenges lie in allowing the teacher enough autonomy in the classroom to be more motivated to apply what he/she learned from the new strategies within a set curriculum and to see what outcomes this has on learners. [Aziz/ Q17]

The social dimension is another emergent theme that is related to teachers' autonomy. Some teachers clearly express their dissatisfaction with the rigid administrative rules and educational policies once more but this time as having a negative impact upon their autonomy and thus upon their teaching. Following this view, Ramia stresses the impact of management policies upon her own autonomy. She states:

I think management also needs to be more organised and clearer with their objectives and what they expect from their teachers and then provide them with the freedom to accomplish those goals. Rigid administrative rules are the main challenge for improving ourselves! The administration does not even acknowledge the role of teachers as active curriculum innovators and implementers. [Ramia/ Q4]

Self-autonomy appears to intersect with several factors. These include: time pressures, as previously discussed; extra work loads, and a general lack of response on the part of the administration to the teachers' needs. In fact, all of these challenges intersect and amplify each other to create a less effective and highly-challenging working environment where teachers are required only to achieve the administration's goals. Reporting these factors at the end of this section highlights the fact that the amalgamation of such factors leaves teachers with the no or very little autonomy in their classrooms. Added to this, teachers seem to be fully aware of the wide gap that exists between policy makers and practitioners (the teachers in this case). As Ramia contends, the teacher's role in the classroom is seldom fully

acknowledged and recognised by the administrators, which can lead to a sense of frustration and a sense of marginalisation, and thereafter often a dramatic loss of motivation.

Related to this, curriculum domination is also underlined as another key factor that prevents teachers' autonomy; they can feel inhibited when creativity is required. Curriculum flexibility (i.e. the ability to navigate between several prescribed alternatives on the part of practitioners) might be taken to be one of the vital features of modern curricula. This appears to be very far from the actual reality in the current context, either in the minds of policy makers or in the other administrative regulations outlined for curriculum implementation. Nadia, for example, alludes to this:

[The] most sought after thing in teaching English is more autonomy for control over the curriculum itself; to teach what is relevant and will have meaning for the students. This will help in saving time and using it in what we think will benefit the students more. Administrators should understand the necessity for giving the teachers the flexibility over the curriculum itself. [Nadia/ Q1]

The presence of a competitive rather than a collaborative working environment also appears to be other problem with the staff themselves. They are often highly competitive with each other, to the degree that they avoid sharing any of their experiences with other teachers. As consequence, this can arrest the development of any collaborative teacher autonomy. Samar expresses her views as follows:

Unfortunately, the team I work with are not interested in this idea of professional development at all. Some of my colleagues, for example, are so competitive. They do not like the idea of collaboration. They do not help me in implementing new ideas in teaching. They care mainly about their images as professional teachers who do not need help from others. It is becoming more of a commercial centre more than it is an educational one. [Samar/ In1]

Samar's views are highly important as collaborative work is crucial to any teacher autonomy that might be developed through colleagues' discussions and/ or by sharing support and experience(s) (Lida, 2009, p. 58). This importance stems from the ability of collaboration to facilitate the development and advancement of new creative ideas in the classes and being able to judge what works in classes, based on other teachers' experiences who are in the very same position as them. Unlike

the views of Sana, Ramia, Aziz, and Nadia which focus on teacher autonomy from an individual perspective, the concept of autonomy here goes beyond the individual to be a socially-constructed idea that is supported by collaboration from within the institution and sometimes from beyond it (Barfield *et al.*, 2002 in Iida, 2009, p. 58).

This working environment can be seen as being a direct result of an educational 'culture' that still promotes competition as the only path towards success and uniqueness. The new teachers in particular, can feel the domination of an 'institutional capital' as constituting a variety of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986), where there are those who perceive their power lies in maintaining the status quo.

5.3.2.2 Technology

Information technology is also a related theme that emerged from the participants' responses in the data. Many responses emphasised the importance of technology in the process of teacher professional development. Many EFL teachers in the study tend to demonstrate positive attitudes toward the role and use of technology in their own practice and consequently in their own development. Teachers' general knowledge and awareness of the techniques of using the technological facilities has placed the teacher in the Syrian context at the centre of a very challenging process which can be improved both at the personal level and in the classroom.

The following quotes demonstrate some of the views of the teachers regarding the use of technology in classes and its impact on their own development. Nisreen, for example, stresses the importance and need for teachers to be updated about the most current teaching methods, so as to cope with the constantly developing and ever-changing English language teaching strategies and technologies both nationally and internationally. Nisreen expresses her views as follows:

Teachers need to be updated about modern teaching methods through international workshops and especially with native speakers of English from all over the world. [Nisreen/ Q2]

Similarly, Layan highlights the importance of using technological facilities in the process of teaching for a better teaching environment and also for the sake of professional development:

I encourage using videos, TV and Internet recourses in the class in addition to some computer- assisted language learning in teaching the foreign language. The use of audio visual has become common in modern-day teaching which will count towards teacher development. [Layan/ Q6]

For many EFL teachers, the use of technology in classes is one of the key principles for addressing the needs of their students in their developing society. This is especially the case in the light of the desire for a movement to being part of a modernised country within a wider global context. It is seen as the way for students to have an easy access to the cultural materials and the linguistic dimensions they need through more communicative processes and also as the way for teachers to reach learners' different learning styles through the use of audio and video facilities. The use of technology in the classroom is also discussed in the literature as being a beneficial tool to increase the learners' motivation to learn the foreign language (i.e. Li & Ni, 2011; Zhao, 2003; Chen, 2005). For Nisreen and Layan, the use of technology can offer an opportunity to pave the way to new ways of teaching foreign languages in an innovative and successful way, which diverges away from the old 'teacher-centred' traditional methods.

5.3.2.3 Training

Professional development programmes for teachers' own improvement also present themselves as a central theme from the data. By reviewing data about teachers' attitudes towards their professional development, the teachers' responses reveal that their attitudes concerning their needs for taking professional development training programmes are influenced by achieving two main goals. These are respectively: a) to change and/ or improve their teaching practice inside their classroom and b) to improve learning outcomes and achievement for their learners.

Teachers discuss the importance of taking training courses as being indispensable for any kind of professional improvement since it enriches their classroom teaching experiences and practice. The teachers advocate that such training should be undertaken by doing professional teacher training courses or by engaging in some type of self-improvement, such as looking for new teaching techniques and/ or being updated with the latest form of pedagogical techniques and strategies to improve

their teaching. For these teachers, this could be achieved by attending conferences; communicating with native speakers and English teachers worldwide, and/ or being engaged in some research. Consequently, improving classroom practice represents a primary concern for most of the teachers who responded to the research instruments, such as Nisreen, Leena, and Rami. In this regard, Nisreen states:

Teachers need to be updated about modern teaching methods through international workshops. Also teachers need to have more contact with native speakers of English all over the world in addition to some group discussions, reading clubs and conferences which will reflect in their teaching practice. [Nisreen/ Q2]

Similarly, Leena discusses the importance of exchanging experiences with other teachers to improve teaching practice:

Exchanging viewpoints about teaching experience is vital and enriches teaching experience and levels the challenges faced. [Leena/ Q3]

In line with Leena's words, Rami is also concerned about teachers training to improve their teaching practice which can in turn be reflected in the final outcomes for learners. He says:

When teaching English as a foreign language, suitable active training such as workshops is important. However, here, in Syria, sometimes it takes the form of passive lectures from academics, which bare no relevance to the practicalities of the classroom and thus to the learners' outcomes; this is the main challenge. [Rami/ Q14]

It is clear through analysing the data that the main three challenges that teachers need to address for professional development are: the challenge of teacher autonomy; the challenge of using technology and the challenge of acquiring professional training. However, analysis of the study's data also reveals that there are two other key factors that have motivated the teachers to engage in and commit to their own professional development. These are namely to: a) improve their teaching practice and b) to enhance their learners' linguistic outcomes. The findings about teachers' attitudes regarding professional development support the literature which argues that teachers' attitudes and beliefs about professional development are influenced by their students learning outcomes rather than any other criteria (e.g.

Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Fullan, 1999; Guskey, 2002, *inter alia*). That is, teachers perceive professional development as a tool for knowledge and skills enhancement, that can contribute to their own development and their learners' effectiveness.

On a practical level the findings also reveal that the process and sequence in which the outcomes of professional development occur also count in teacher development. That is, the findings from the data appear to support Guskey's 'Alternative Model of Teacher Change' in which teachers' attitudes and beliefs occur after the implementation process when they gain some evidence of improved student learning which, in its turn, comes as a result from the changes that have been made in teaching practices (Guskey, 2002, p. 382).

5.3.3 Barriers to the aims and objectives

The data also reveal that being able to achieving the course aims and objectives is another main challenge the teachers face in their teaching practice. According to the teachers, this is often influenced by other factors related to the teachers themselves or to their work environment.

5.3.3.1. Lack of Awareness

In this regard, teachers draw attention to other factors such as a lack of awareness on the part of the teachers, in addition to cultural and environmental factors:

Lack of awareness is revealed by the data as being one of the main obstacles that can prevent participants from achieving the course aims and objectives. They further claim that, in their teaching settings, some teachers can lack the depth of knowledge to respond appropriately to the aims and objectives set out by the materials. In other words, teachers fail to achieve the course aims and objectives because they lack the means and the knowledge to respond to the courses' goals and objectives. Here, teachers' familiarity with these goals becomes a prerequisite for any course to facilitate the desired academic attainment, which in turn leads to better learning outcomes. This view is made clear by teachers such as Sana, Leena, Ramia, Nadia, and Bayan.

Leena, for example, draws attention to the importance of teachers' familiarity with the aims and objectives of any course before undertaking it. She pinpoints:

One of the main challenges that any teacher has is the challenge of the outcome and the challenge of aims achievement. However, when those involved in the process of teaching/or learning are ignorant of the purposes of the language course, the results will be definitely reflected in their achievements! [Leena/ Q3]

Additionally, Ramia argues that, although the teachers reveal some degree of awareness of the language course aims and objectives, there are some contextual factors that can hamper their achievement. For her, the obstacle lies in some teachers' inability to apply aims and objectives that have been pre-determined in a foreign context that is different from the Syrian one.

In our classes, we follow the Common European Framework and its objectives. Therefore, I think the main obstacle is that of not having enough understanding of these objectives in a Syrian context. [Ramia/ Q4]

Responding to the demands and assumptions made by a culture that is quite often very different to their own, when confronted by and using the prescribed materials, is a recurring theme that has emerged from the teachers' responses. The theme of cultural assumptions and their relation to the study's different constructs is emphasised by most of the teachers. Those teachers find cultural difference to be a barrier to achieving the materials' aims and objectives. Ghufra, for example, sees this mismatch between the students' culture of the student and that of the materials as being one of the main reasons behind the students' own de-motivation. She says:

Nowadays we teach the Face2face series which is based on CLT [Communicative Language Teaching]. It's true that we have lots of speaking activities there, but these ignore our culture and so students don't feel motivated enough to participate in class discussion. So, I find myself modifying my course objectives to match my students' needs and interest. [Ghufra/ Q10]

Equally, Yara provides some examples of the effects of the culture differences in her language class. She states:

For example, when talking about cultural differences, the first thing that comes to my mind is the exercises that ask students to talk about their families. A lot of students do not prefer to talk about their families and mention their names. Other activities include vocabulary not accepted by the culture of the students, like 'girlfriend' or, 'boyfriend' for example. I am not saying here that I am for or against this. I am just reporting some of the students' reactions. [Yara/ In 5]

The examples provided by Yara are similar to the ones that are repeated in each and every class, especially in this conservative society where these seem to neglect and ignore the country's traditions, and sometimes even clash with the religious doctrines. In such cases, avoiding teaching the target culture may not be the solution, but students should be encouraged to look at these differences more objectively and from a new perspective, where at least an acceptance of 'the other' should be encouraged. Students should be helped to understand that language cannot be separated from the culture in which it is embedded (Saniei, 2012). This is not to say that students should completely ignore their cultures and adapt the new targeted one, but they should look at their culture as being part of 'the world's cultural heritage' (Clopek, 2008, p.12).

Besides cultural differences, the teachers also refer to other contextual factors as presenting obstacles to meeting the materials' aims and objectives. One of these factors is Syria's political instability. Although this factor seems to be arbitrary, the effect of living in such a troubled country for more than four years, at the time of writing-up this research, on teaching is inevitable, whether on language courses specifically or on the whole process of teaching in the country in general. The significant influence of political instability is in addition to the psychological factors which also have a negative impact on language classes for both the students and the teachers, including, for example external factors like absenteeism, tardiness, context instability, amongst others. The latter factors also have an impact on the process of teaching, as they all can contribute to a lesser achievement of the course aims and objectives. In this regard, Bahaa states:

The bad situation in the country, as well as absenteeism is the biggest obstacle in reaching any teacher goals. [Bahaa/ Q15]

The impact of the political situation in Syria upon the students' eagerness and willingness to learn and upon the teachers' motivation to teach is clearly apparent. Issues like safety and accessibility have a significant influence on achieving the desired goals of a language course which applies equally to all teaching programmes exceeded those courses offered in the Higher Institute of Languages context to include all teaching programmes in the country as a whole.

5.4 EFL teachers' involvement in the curriculum process

Analysis of the data also reveals some variation in EFL teachers' attitudes towards the future of their involvement in the processes of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation. These views reflect three main themes: a) teachers' opinions about what advantages the potential new curriculum might have for better English language teaching; b) teachers' perceptions of their contribution to the process of curriculum development, including the processes of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation, and (3) the theme of teachers' empowerment.

5.4.1 Teachers attitudes towards new curricula

This section reports upon the findings regarding teachers' attitudes about the main features of the potential curriculum. Three main themes are discussed as revealed by the research data. This section firstly describes teachers' perceptions of what the term 'curriculum' means and the nature of its main features. Secondly it details the teachers' ideas about the main reasons behind the need for new curriculum development and finally the advantages teachers expect from developing this potential curriculum are discussed.

5.4.1.1 Teachers' understanding of 'curriculum'

It is widely acknowledged that teachers' attitudes have a significant influence on the interpretation of any kind of curriculum change and development (Newstorm & Davis, 1997). It is therefore essential to explore these insights and attitudes to determine teachers' influence in this regard in the Syrian educational context. Exploring the understanding teachers have of curriculum issues and what it does and means for both them and their students is of central importance to this current study. That is,

although formally assessing teachers' cognitive knowledge of curriculum issues and approaches lies beyond the scope and aims of this study, it still remains necessary to observe what perceptions and interpretations the teachers hold about the term 'curriculum' and its main features. In contrast to many curriculum studies which reveal that most instructors who are involved in curriculum implementation view the curriculum as merely the material(s) (e.g. Alwan, 2006; Kasapoglu, 2010), the study data reveal that the participant teachers have a much wider view of the term 'curriculum'. In fact, the majority of the teachers' responses seem to indicate much broader insight about the meaning of curriculum, which goes beyond the textbooks themselves, and also embraces: the planning process; the evaluation and assessment process, and the methods to be followed in teaching.

For some participants like Ramia, and Yasser, curriculum revolves around the materials to be taught in their classes. For example, Ramia sees curriculum as:

... related to the textbooks used by students in school or any teaching institution. This is what we use to receive in order to teach. [Ramia/ Q4]

Similarly, Yasser indicates:

Curriculum means all materials used in teaching. [Yasser/ Q19]

Ramia and Yasser see the curriculum here as the textbooks that are used in class regardless of any other curricular activities which accompany these books. Although this view of curriculum as merely the materials is considered to be a narrow view in many other studies that have a context similar to the current study, I refute this as being the case for the current participants. For Alwan (2006), for example, this perspective of curriculum as 'the book' can be attributed to the teachers' views of curriculum as a product rather than a process. In turn, this has been one of the outcomes of the influence of the hierarchical structures dominant in educational institutions in the United Kingdom of Emirates. This hierarchical structure and its impact upon the teachers as being the recipients of curriculum rather than participants in it, is also reflected in Syrian educational contexts. The directives for

curriculum use are usually delivered to teachers from those who work at upper levels in the hierarchical structure of any educational institution.

However, these teachers reveal a sense of dissatisfaction at their roles as being mere recipients of whatever reaches them as curriculum, coming from policy makers who are the decision-makers in this regard. Asseel, for example remarks:

‘teachers should have an input in creating a broader curriculum which focuses upon developing the students’ thinking. This means that the new curriculum must motivate students to be independent and focus on students’ needs and interests. This curriculum should also focus upon including new strands of technology and new methods of teaching’.
[Asseel/ Q11]

In her description of the new curriculum as she sees it, Asseel reveals a broader sense of awareness of curriculum activities, which definitely goes beyond considering curriculum as merely the textbook.

This inclination amongst teachers to think of textbooks as constituting the curriculum is borne out by the literature. According to Ornstein and Hunkins, for example, ‘teachers are in a position to influence the curriculum, but they really have little authority to recommend changes in the standard architecture of the curriculum’ (1997, p.358). This could represent an indication of the significant role teachers could play as promoters of a positive change, if only they were afforded a chance to actively participate.

In addition to the textbook, other teachers extend their views of curriculum to include other curriculum practices like the planning process, the evaluation process, and the process of implementation. To begin with curriculum as a *planning* practice, this is apparent from the data from the teachers’ reference to the term curriculum as a ‘plan’, where more attention should be paid to the students’ ‘needs’ and the students’ ‘benefits’. This view for curriculum as a plan is demonstrated by both Rami’s and Bahaa’s responses. Rami explains:

Curriculum should be a plan which aims to better the student’s knowledge of English. [Rami/ Q14]

Bahaa also highlights the absence of appropriate planning for a curriculum within the Syrian context.

Within the context of Syrian education, not much consideration is given to proper curriculum planning, i.e. a curriculum that will prepare the students to meet the challenges they will encounter in real life.
[Bahaa/ Q15]

Rami's and Bahaa's views about curriculum as a 'plan' may also be read as a reflection of their awareness of the absence of their roles in designing the materials. In the current hierarchical structure where the curriculum reaches teachers without any practical or genuine consideration of the students' actual needs, or the teachers' views of how to respond to those needs, results in some teachers reacting instinctively to meeting such needs as several teachers have pointed out previously (see section 5.2.3.3.). The lack of specific directions and instructions on how to address the learners' real needs leads to teachers devising their own strategies and techniques to meet learners' immediate demands and needs. The element of 'students' needs' as the basis of curriculum is also highlighted by both Bayan and Hana. Bayan says for example:

This is a series of guidelines based on or around a proper needs analysis. [Bayan/ Q12]

For Bayan, the curriculum is a plan that should evolve around the students' needs and interests. Similarly, Anas indicates that curriculum should include anything that might ultimately result in the development of students' language skills and ability. He describes curriculum as a plan as delivering:

Something that helps us to develop the abilities of our students from A to Z. [Anas/ Q25]

In a similar vein, but from a slightly different angle, Yumna focuses on the aims and objectives of the course where the term 'curriculum' is used to refer to anything that can guarantee the attainment of the former. Yumna remarks that the materials are often used in a course just to support the achievement of that course's aims and objectives.

A set structure comprising of aims and objectives that need to be accomplished in an academic year. This is supplemented by course materials to achieve these aims. [Yumna/ Q13]

Some other teachers like Samar and Nadia also accredit the term 'curriculum' as being a wider concept which includes other aspects such as *assessment* and *evaluation*. Samar, for instance, uses the metaphor of an 'umbrella' to indicate that the concept of curriculum is a wide one, involving many aspects and practices. She states:

I think 'curriculum' means everything we teach. Well, I am not sure. I think this word is the umbrella for many things like the goals and the objectives of the course, the textbook, the materials we use, tests, and evaluation forms in addition to the activities we do, all I guess. [Samar/ In1]

In sum, the world views of the teachers not only indicate their active awareness of the elements crucial to any curriculum, they also provide a visionary understanding of a potential curriculum which is based on learners' needs. Although the teachers in the Syrian context are certainly denied any 'voice' in the curricula design, at the same time they demonstrate a full awareness of modern trends and issues concerning curricular topics, particularly those directly related to learners. This in turn supports the strong argument that practitioners, namely teachers, should be at the heart of any prospective curriculum for any meaningful attempt to promote and effect change.

5.4.1.2 The need for a new curriculum

Teachers' discourse regarding the need for a curriculum development in the Institute shows deep divisions. As far as the promotion of new curriculum is concerned, three key teacher standpoints can be identified: (1) those who support an inclusive change; (2) those who support partial change, and (3) those who support the current curriculum and object to any changes.

As for those teachers supporting change, the teachers' reasons for such a standpoint regarding change tend to vary. However, there seems to be some consensus regarding the demand for designing a new curriculum which would be solely

developed for the Institute's specific context. Coping with the demands and challenges of a rapidly-changing world is, for example, one of the main reasons behind the teachers' interest in changing the materials they have to hand at the moment.

Iman, in this regard, gives the impression that changing the materials would create an environment for teaching English in which both the teachers and the learners are challenged. She believes that:

'This will give a new challenge to students and teachers'. [Iman/ In2]

The emergence of new challenges and the demands made by society in general also provide a strong rationale behind the need for change.

Echoing similar concerns, Bahaa also stresses the necessity of prioritising curriculum change especially in light of the notably-increasing gap between the new types of learners and what is increasingly perceived as an old-fashioned curriculum. Bahaa continues on to say:

'This [the curriculum] should be geared to the direction of a modern type of learning away from this boring one'. [Bahaa/ Q15]

From a position of being involved in the process of teaching, it seems that both teachers and learners feel the need for change most acutely, as they are the ones most implicated in the actual application of the curriculum. This need for a change increasingly seems to originate from those who are in direct contact with learners or those who represent the actual or executive aspect of the curriculum, which in this context are the teachers.

Other reasons behind the teachers' interest in curriculum change also vary amongst the teachers. Nadia, for example, reveals that her desire for a change is not related to any perception of failings in the current English teaching materials which she uses in her classroom. Instead, the desire behind her call for change is to increase motivation with the currently-taught materials, which she believes is being diminished by the overuse of these materials in teaching. She states:

*I had always thought we needed to change the textbooks. I sometimes feel bored and de-motivated since I have been teaching this for 4 years now. I think **change for the sake of change** is a good idea to motivate teachers themselves. [Nadia/ Q1]*

Similarly, Leemar thinks that the materials used have some drawbacks and that they need to be changed for these inherent weaknesses;

Yes, I think so and we conducted a mini study and passed some questionnaires concerning the current materials. We found some weaknesses in the current textbook, especially the upper-intermediate levels. [Leemar/ Q8]

In contrast to those advocate a change to the materials, other teachers seem to be set against such changes: justifying their dissatisfaction with this idea with different reasons. Asseel, for example, views the materials they currently have to hand as being able to achieve the course goals and objectives, implying that the students should make more effort if they want to further develop their skills. She says:

I believe the curriculum is fine. If the teacher can produce the learning objectives and if the students put in the effort, they will definitely see results of good language performance after they finish the courses. They need to do the assigned homework and actively participate in class discussions. [Asseel/ Q11]

For teachers like Asseel, the assumption seems to be that the expected goal of any curriculum is to reflect and fulfil the needs and challenges the student will encounter once leaving the training institution. Consequently, the idea of changing the English materials seems to entail an unnecessary process, because for some teachers the current materials have proved to be more than adequate for fulfilling the students' needs in order to learn a foreign language. However, that seems to only be the case if, in Bayan's words, the teacher:

'is able to achieve the learning objectives even with digression from the curriculum, then this should be encouraged as it will be infinitely more interesting and engaging for the students and will encourage learning'. [Bayan/ Q12]

Other teachers' responses indicate that they think that being professional in teaching English is a wide remit, of which the use of the teaching materials forms just one part and which is perhaps significantly less important than the other parts. For such

teachers, the idea of increasing their commitment to their own classes is much more useful than starting with new materials. From this teaching standpoint, it appears that what really needs to be changed is in fact the dedication to enhancing the quality of the English classes together with the teaching processes, because mastering English skills for them is not something which relies solely on the use of books. One example of this view is expressed by Yasser:

I do not think we need a new curriculum. Mastering a language does not require changing curricula. They need to change their teaching commitment for better English teaching. It is as they say “bloom where you are planted”. [Yasser/ Q19]

Working on self-improvement for professional development, is seen as being a top priority in this case. It embodies the idea of improving teaching qualifications, knowledge and techniques by all the different means available, which is important for this latter group of teachers, and which could be seen as being even more important than a change in the materials themselves.

Self- improvement; professional development; commitment to excellence at work, along with the achievement of the requisite goals and objectives are all notable and important factors to be considered for creating a better environment in which to teach English. However, they tend to constitute the overarching ‘umbrella’ of justification under which are concealed the other reasons behind the teachers’ resistance to a curriculum change.

From one point of view, teachers’ support of the prescribed teaching materials that they use in their classrooms could be perceived as being informed by a suppressive working culture that denies teachers any active involvement in decision-making. Within such a working environment where such constraints are often heavy-handed, teachers can be deemed to be ‘normalised’ (i.e. made to think so) to believe that whatever they receive from the policy-makers must be of great value. The issue of ‘power’ seems to be amplified once more with the perception of those at the top of the hierarchal power structure appearing to impose their vision directly or even indirectly on others who hold a lesser position than them within the same structure.

Another interpretation of the teachers' inclination to support and even champion the teaching materials might be read as an unwillingness on the part of the teachers to go through what could be a long process of development, where they could spend considerable time and effort designing and refining materials, as well as planning and interacting with their colleagues about curriculum concerns (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1997).

A third group of teachers seems to be uncertain whether they welcome such a project of change or not. They appear to find the idea of a change worthy in principle, but seem to prefer a partial change or an adaptation of the existing curriculum rather than undergoing a whole process of curriculum redesign. In other words, creating a new curriculum for those teachers is seen as being too ambitious a project and they suggest adding or modifying some aspects of the materials they have, instead. Layan states:

No, I don't think we need a new curriculum. Face2Face is really good. We just need some supplementary material that might complement what we have already. [Layan/ Q6]

Similarly, Ayham expresses his support of a partial change in the curriculum if needs be. He says:

No, I don't think so. I find the curriculum used is very good as it meets the students' needs, but this doesn't mean that it is the best. If we find other curricula that are better, it will be a great idea to negotiate them with teachers. Or we can just change some parts of the current one. [Ayham/ Q22]

5.4.1.3 Expectations of the new curriculum

The data also reveal that teachers appear to be generally quite positive about the idea of developing several new language curricula, based on students' needs and targeted specifically at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages context. This would appear to be a prudent course of action as any change in this institution would subsequently effect other educational institutions and such a change would be in the national interest.

The participant teachers have proposed that the Institute should set out a plan to construct curriculum materials that should form the foundation of the Institute's own educational determination and regulation regarding what should be taught in a language course. Regarding this topic, the teachers describe four key advantages to be gained by changing the materials. These are: a) arousing more interest in the process of teaching in classes; b) creating a more professional atmosphere for teachers; c) affording more attention to cultural considerations, and d) boosting teachers' self-esteem and self-confidence.

'Lack of interest' has been discussed previously (see section 5.3.1.3.) as presenting a hindrance to teachers' success in the classroom. With regard to the same issue, some teachers see developing new curricula as a possible way of overcoming this challenge and of creating more interest and engagement in language classes. Alaa's remarks in this regard:

Yes, I encourage the idea of change, and change should start from adding new materials. This will give new challenges to students and teachers. [Alaa/ Q5]

Similarly, Mariam encourages the idea of constructing a new curriculum to create a professional atmosphere of collaboration between the teachers themselves. She claims:

Yes, developing a new curriculum could lead to a professional dialogue in the institute. [Mariam/ Q9]

Creating a challenging curriculum and increasing interest in the teaching materials is of paramount concern for some of the teachers. However, this should not be seen as the only reason for changing the curriculum as this abiding interest could disappear after a couple of years of implementation. Here, other teachers like Nadia, for example, underline the importance of developing a new curriculum and the necessity of keeping it going as a continuous process. She states:

Yes, I believe that the development of a new curriculum will lead to improvement in teaching as long as the curriculum itself is done by professionals who really aim for improvement and development. These professionals will try to address the problems they had earlier and will be able to address any problems in the future. I think

developing a new curriculum is an ongoing process, not just a one off design. [Nadia/ Q1]

Other teachers refer to paying real attention to the issue of culture as being one of the advantages of creating a new curriculum. This is a crucial issue as this can provide an opportunity to create a suitable and appropriate curriculum based on a proper analysis of the students' needs, rather than just importing materials from international publishers. Bahaa endorses this view:

Yes. Teaching materials should be regionally geared. Each region has its own customs and habits and the use of material that is familiar to the student will increase learning. I believe that a new curriculum designed by everyone involved in the student's classes can only be a good thing. [Bahaa/ Q15]

In addition to the reasons given by Nadia, Bahaa, and Alaa, other teachers' views revolve around the effect this new curriculum might have on the teachers' attitudes themselves. This is mentioned by both Layan and Yasser:

Designing a new curriculum might lead to some improvements in the process of teaching, especially if the attitude of the teachers is affected positively. [Layan/ Q6]

This view highlights some of the main factors for creating a good plan of curriculum development, which is based on: involving many people; accumulating more thoughts and ideas; including stakeholders from across all levels of interest, i.e. teachers, students, administrators, etc. Yasser's words point to new hope and aspiration:

Yes, I do. Developing a new curriculum may provide teachers new means, mechanisms, thoughts and techniques that could help in improving teaching and meeting students' needs. [Yasser/ Q19]

Teachers' expectations of any potential new curriculum could be viewed as being basically influenced by their language class practice and by the main challenges and drawbacks they encounter whilst delivering their lessons. For me, this is an interesting issue as it highlights the necessity for teachers' participation in any curricular activity, because they are the ones who would be implementing the new

curriculum in the classroom and they would be the best ones to test both its efficiency and effectiveness based on students' development and achievements.

5.4.2 Teachers' attitudes towards curriculum planning

Teachers' attitudes about their contribution to planning any new curricula are generally quite positive. Most of the teachers welcome the idea of being able to contribute to the planning process and some even consider this participation to be essential, if and when a decision has to be made about curriculum development. In their responses to the questions about the curriculum planning stage, some of the teachers revealed an interest in extending their involvement and provided some suggestions for areas where they thought they would be able to, in their opinion, contribute positively to improving the quality of this new proposed curriculum. Rami's opinion is clear in this regard:

I think a curriculum should be planned before the start of the year and then the materials should be adapted according to level. An audit of students' ability at English at the Institute could help this, although this is highly subjective. [Rami/ Q14]

Teachers' views and comments regarding the planning stage in curriculum development have been very diverse amongst the participant teachers. However, both needs analysis and scrutiny of the teaching environment are mostly highlighted here as the two main themes that have emerged from the teachers' responses in the data.

5.4.2.1 Needs analysis

Needs analysis is a very important stage and component of the process of curriculum development. Its importance can result from dissatisfaction with materials and methodologies that are designed to fit all learners (Long, 2005). There is a basic need for courses to be developed in such a way as to be more relevant to the needs of specific groups of learners developed in their own learning context, whether at an institutional level or in a society as a whole (Long, 2005; Christison & Murray, 2014).

Most of the participants of this study reveal awareness of the importance of needs analysis in the process of curriculum planning. Learners are seen as a good source of information to provide useful and valid insights about their particular needs and expectations from a language course. Nadia remarks about this importance of this:

The teacher's role should be the main role and the biggest role in designing a new curriculum. Who else knows better than teachers about students' needs, the teaching/ learning process, the interesting topics, and their contexts? [Nadia/ Q1]

As teachers discuss needs analysis from different perspectives based on their views about what is important in this process, their focus seems to be divided, according to three key criteria effecting how the data for need analyses are treated: a) the *time* of collecting the data; b) the *method* of collecting data and c) the actual procedures of *data analysis*.

To begin with the first area, the teachers' focus is directed on the issue of the best *time* for collecting data. In this respect, data reveals a diverse variety in teachers' responses about the most appropriate time for conducting needs analyses during the process of curriculum development. Some teachers argue that decisions about the content should be made before the start of the course as everything should be done by the time the students start with their classes. In this regard, Yasser explains:

[...] I think you need to take a long term to be able to participate in making a new curriculum even if you have had a good experience. This should also be reflected while analysing your student' needs and should all be set by the start of the new course. [Yasser/ Q19]

Another group of teachers argues that the analysis should be conducted at the start of the programme to ensure that the right group of learners are going to take the course and that these learners have a clear idea about the context of the study. Bahaa says in this regard:

I don't think it is a good idea to conduct an analysis for the learners needs before the start of the programme. This will be detached from the actual learners who are going to take the course. However, this should be done by the first couple of lessons and no more than that. [Bahaa/ Q15]

Finally, other teachers consider the best time to conduct the analysis to be *during* the course to assess the students' progress in the new curriculum and their attitudes towards their knowledge and experiences in this new curriculum. This opinion is conveyed by Leena. She says:

Teachers need to know basics and guidelines of what has been done and how it has been done during the course of implementing the curriculum. They should be aware of what needs the students have in the new curriculum while the course is going on. [Leena/ Q3]

Although there is validity with each of the opinions of the best time to conduct the needs analysis, ideally needs analysis should be considered as a *process* rather than as a single action. That is, decisions about the content of the curriculum should be made before the start of the course, at the beginning of the course and as the course proceeds to ensure the greatest benefits the direct interaction between the teachers, the students, and the materials. Both teachers and students would then have enough time to discuss issues related to their curriculum and to reflect upon their own experiences in the new curriculum (Nunan, 1988, p.5). However, as Auerbach suggests, the learners do not necessarily constitute a reliable source, the best source, or the *only* legitimate source of collecting data (1995, p.26). Other sources for collecting data may include experienced language teachers and graduates of the programme concerned, employers, subject-area specialists, etc. (*ibid*).

Analysis of the current study data also reveals that the teachers demonstrate great awareness about the methods for collecting enough data about the students' needs from the language course as a whole and about the advantages of using these methods in the analysis process.

Both Muhammad and Layan, for example, suggest conducting a focus group study to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum and to reveal the areas of interest for the learners whilst exposing them to different parts of that curriculum. Muhammad, for example, states:

I would greatly place stress on the idea of the curriculum suitability with the learners' level through the planning phase, and make sure

that the book is directed to and designed for our learners. This can be achieved, as I think; through a focus group study where we can discover what exact needs our students have. [Muhammad/ Q20]

With a similar standpoint, Layan indicates that the students' need to be exposed to different kinds of books to be able to distinguish what works and what does not in the classroom and equally what can benefit the students the most. She says:

I need to expose my students in the focus group to different course books so that I can have some required background about their needs and interests. [Layan/ Q6]

Both Muhammad and Layan accentuate the importance of the 'focus group' technique in the process of data analysis. 'Focus group' is used here to refer to, following Krueger & Casey, 'carefully-planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment' (2000, p.5). Like in many other similar contexts, the focus group method has proved to be very useful and helpful in eliciting data about the needs and interest of the students in this specific Syrian context. In this regard, focus groups can be used to gain ideas, comments and experiences from both the educators and the students about the new curriculum. Based on the views collected, both the needs and any eventual problems with the new curriculum can be clarified and subsequently amended before disseminating the new curriculum more widely.

Other teachers, like Leemar, suggest the interview technique as one approach to obtain constructive data about students' needs, concerns and problems.

Some background in curriculum design might be needed but is not strictly necessary if the teacher is conscious of the linguistic goals in the programme along with the real needs of the students. I would suggest then spending enough time interviewing students about their needs and problems to gain the required data before the process of curriculum analysis. [Leemar/ Q8]

Leemar's views above about the use of interviews to conduct students' needs analysis are noteworthy. Interviews can be useful for gaining in-depth data on what seem to be pertinent and meaningful categories for information concerning the curriculum. They can also help to drawing attention to other important aspects of curriculum raised by the students, which may not have been previously considered

or mooted. This can be even more beneficial and useful for discussions by asking the students to clarify exactly what they think about a variety of topics that are presented in the curriculum.

Finally, the teachers recommend surveys as a possibly useful approach to obtaining enough data about the students' needs from a language course. This method is referred to by Kais who highlights the importance of surveys for data collection. He explains further:

I think surveys are crucial in needs analysis as teachers know what students at these levels can manage in terms of learning new concepts and what the gaps are. Teachers can be very advantageous in the creation of the learning objectives but as previously stated, I think it is paramount that students are involved in the actual curriculum design and not only the surveys. [Kais/ In4]

Surveys can be particularly useful in needs analysis to give the students a chance to express their views and detail their experiences individually and anonymously, in a way in which they might feel less restricted and inhibited than in other data collection techniques. Surveys can also help curriculum designers to test their hypotheses about certain aspects of the new curriculum through structured questions, thereby obtaining some overall perceptions about certain pre-determined points. It can also help to gather enough opinions for facilitating and clarifying teachers' understanding of the learners' needs through means of the open-ended responses.

As discussed above, some teachers demonstrate solid awareness of the data analysis process and the techniques to be followed with regards to students' needs analysis in the process of curriculum development. Teachers also demonstrate a wide knowledge about the strengths and usefulness of each of these methods especially when linked to the specific context of the study and the targeted student population. However, it is possible that using one form or procedure alone for collecting data about the students' needs may not be enough as each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Instead, as Brown (2001) and Long (2005) have both emphasised, multiple sources of information through multiple methods should be used for needs analysis. Additionally, the sequence of data analysis in this regard

is highly important. That is, as Norris *et al* (2009) assert, analytic activities should move 'from existing information, to collection of new knowledge through unstructured techniques, to ultimately testing the validity of patterns across relevant informants with more structured methods.' (Brown, 2001; Long, 2005 in Norris *et al*, 2009, p. 9)

As for the teachers' attitudes regarding their own contribution to the curriculum planning process, teachers reveal high motivation and a willingness to participate in the planning of the new curriculum. They have also highlighted the areas where they consider that they can give the best of their teaching, along with the knowledge and experiences they believe they need to acquire in order to improve in this regard. All the teachers who responded to the part of the questionnaires about their participation indicated a sense of willingness to participate in curriculum change and design. Leemar, for example, maintains that:

Teachers are in direct contact with their students and so when they need to design any curriculum they should consider their students' needs and try to update it from time to time. [Leemar/ Q8]

Similarly, Ammar draws attention to the importance of having enough training for teachers before their actual participation in the planning of the new curriculum. He says:

Yes, I do. Because special training can enhance the teacher's abilities to become more professional and more creative. [Ammar/ Q18]

Teacher training is essential before teachers can become involved in any stage of the process of curriculum development. They need special training to ensure that their knowledge about key curriculum subjects and approaches is continuously enhanced and updated in line with the newest techniques. This is particularly true when considering permanent change as one of the key features of curriculum rather than considering curriculum as something static.

Iman, for example, also refers it being necessary for teachers to be involved in the planning based on their experiences in class and their familiarity with their own students' specific needs and interests. She states:

I would use my knowledge of students' needs and interests and focus on bringing about the topics that increase their motivation to learn English. I would also try to simplify things for them. For example, sometimes we teach grammatical rules which are no longer common and which we tell our students not to use in their daily life. So what's the point of teaching that? [Iman/ In2]

Unlike Ammar and Iman, Samar appears to be less optimistic in her views about teachers' participation in curriculum planning. This, for her, is justified because of the uniqueness of the context in which teachers' opinions are neglected and there is a general failure for them to be consulted. She remarks:

[...] I think in our context, teachers are never consulted at any stage although they are the ones who implement the curriculum in class and they are the ones who are familiar with their students' needs. I am talking here about being consulted and about designing it themselves. They should help during all the stages of the curriculum design. [Samar/ In1]

5.4.2.2 Environment analysis

The data analysis also reveals that teachers often pay far more attention to students' needs analysis in the planning stage of curriculum development than to any meaningful analysis and consideration of the teaching environment. Although teachers have mentioned some environmental and practical factors (e.g. time, motivation, mixed classes, etc.), as presenting real challenge in the classroom (see section 5.3.1.), very few teachers refer to the importance of conducting an analysis of the situational factors, which can have a considerable influence on the outcomes of the curriculum and its usability. Here, the teachers' main focus was on other wider aspects of the environment and its influence on the context of the study. Specifically, the teachers' main focus is on the cultural factors and the political ones.

With regard to the cultural factors, Muhammad for example, stresses the importance of considering the cultural differences at the planning stage to ensure that a curriculum is provided which matches the students' context. He states:

I would greatly stress the idea of the curriculum being suitable to the learners' level throughout the planning phase, and would make sure that the book is directed to and designed for our learners. Also, I would

be aware of the cultural differences between the West and our Middle Eastern culture. [Muhammad/ Q20]

Similarly, Bahaa stresses the importance of learning the cultural environment and background before conducting the curriculum design. According to Bahaa, the teachers play a key role in this environmental analysis, based on their experiences and their contact with the students:

Teachers' experience can be a very useful source of information for deciding what book is to be adopted and what books are going to be useful to the students in harmony with the learners' cultural backgrounds. [Bahaa/ Q15]

Likewise, Kais also sheds light on the major impact environmental factor have on decisions about the curriculum. However, Kais's focus here is on the political conflict that is taking place at the current time of the study, as well as on issues related to the effect of globalisation and technology on the students in Syria and how these different constraints should be taken into account before the start of the curriculum design. He states in this regard:

The political changes might cause two different reactions from the students. Most students are more open to the Media and to English and English spoken channels. They know how important it is to speak English in order to pass your ideas to the whole world. Students these days are different from the old ones regardless of their age. All are familiar with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. They need English to communicate with the world through these channels. They watch Arabic channels in addition to English spoken ones like CNN, BBC. That type of students will be more aware of the importance of English and learning this language. On the other hand, I think that there will be some students who will come from an opposing standpoint against learning the language as they are proud of their mother language and they do not need to learn the 'other's' language. The first group I think will out- weigh the second. [Kais/ In4]

Kais's views about the necessity of examining and considering the limitations and constraints are pertinent and important for rigorous curriculum design. An awareness of the fact that all teachers are highly-trained, for example, has a major effect on curriculum design as teachers are the implementers of the curriculum whether through formatting or presenting the course (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.14). Therefore, environmental analysis is of serious consequence in ensuring that a

usable curriculum be produced at the practical level and not only a sound theoretical one (Tessmer, 1990, p. 56; Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 14).

It is therefore essential to complete an environment analysis before starting the curriculum design as it might affect a number of subsequent decisions regarding the design of the intended curriculum. It also can ensure that the curriculum embodies the proper outcomes and strategies to be successfully utilised in its intended setting at the Institute.

5.4.3 Teachers' role in curriculum design

Choices about curriculum content and sequencing are vital in the on-going process of curriculum development. It is imperative here to focus on what will be in the course and the order in which it will appear. That is,

‘making sensible, well-justified decisions about content is one of the most important parts of curriculum design. If poor content is chosen, then excellent teaching and learning result in a poor return for learning efforts’ (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 71).

Therefore, careful consideration should be given to what should be presented in the language course and in what order, in order to ensure the effectiveness and usefulness of the language course. In their responses, teachers' attitudes about their participation in curriculum design can best be summarised in the following way:

Firstly, many of the teachers reveal a strong willingness to participate in the process of designing a new curriculum according to their different areas of interest. Secondly, the teachers' primary focus in curriculum design appeared to lie with: the choice of the materials' themes and topics; the choice of the supporting materials; the design of the activities; the choice of writing exercises, and the choice of the reading passages and vocabulary. In addition, only one participant revealed any interest in the actual structure of the new curriculum, while no participants mentioned other aspects of language form, such as grammar, for example. Thirdly, some teachers paid some attention to the logistics of designing the new curriculum and who would actually be involved in the process; the idea of collaboration was raised in this respect.

Teachers' attitudes about their participation in the design of the new curriculum and their willingness and high confidence in this regard can be attributed to their easy familiarity with the students' needs. This is based on their classroom experiences and the fact that they have taught different sets of language series to different students, so they are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of these materials, in addition to this being allied with their familiarity of what usually works, and what does not in a particular language course. Yasser, for example, expresses his views about his contribution to curriculum design as follows:

Yes, of course I have the ability to be involved in designing a new curriculum and I would like to, but this thing should be given enough time. I have been teaching English for 8 years and I know the needs of different students. But I cannot make a new curriculum alone. I need the help of other teachers and professionals. [Yasser/ Q19]

Teachers' attitudes also vary about their participation in the actual content design of the new curriculum. Unlike Muhammad, Leena, Nisreen, and Ramia who describe their interest in the design of various aspects of the curriculum, Ammar expresses his willingness to adopt prescribed materials rather than designing them himself.

Sure I would like to participate in selecting authentic materials and adopting them, maybe. I do not think designing the whole content of the new curriculum will be a good idea; it will be time-consuming as these materials are readily available. [Ammar/ Q18]

Ammar's thoughts about adopting materials instead of developing them could be due to the fact that the Institute has not developed any curriculum or any kind of materials, since it was established in 1995. The materials which have been used up to the current time have all been adopted from international publishers and implemented in class without any modification being made or even allowing for teachers to have the privilege of doing so. However, although adopting them appears to be the easiest way to have teaching materials immediately to hand, much efforts and attentions should have been invested in the process, as recommended by Brown (1995, p.157). That is, if the Institute decides to *adopt* the materials, using Brown's (1995) explanation, rather than developing them, the following key points should be taken into consideration:

Firstly, sensible decisions should be made about the desired type of materials needed for the course based on needs analysis and specific course objectives (e.g. structural materials, topical materials, skills materials, etc.), and the specific genre of materials which need to adopt (i.e. books, journals, magazines, etc.). Secondly, all the different levels of the chosen types of materials should be acquired in order to choose the content that best fulfils the needs of the class. Thirdly, an evaluation should be conducted to result in only the materials being chosen, which are considered to be totally suitable and appropriate for a specific programme. Finally, there should be a strategy in place for a regular review of those adopted materials during and after implementation to ensure that they remain relevant to the needs of the students in the particular programme (Brown, 1995, pp. 157-163).

With another, different perspective, teachers like Muhammad, Nisreen, Leena, Ramia, etc., welcome the idea of curriculum development to meet students' needs in this specific context at the Institute. These teachers reveal some degree of interest in the actual design for some aspects of curriculum content. The main focus, in this regard, is on the choice of topics and themes, the design of the activities and drills, and the choice of the reading extracts and writing activities.

Some teachers additionally reveal an interest in choosing the main topics and themes of the language course. Muhammad's maintains that:

Teachers should be given the chance to suggest their desired topics in the development of curricula. I would like to participate in choosing themes of the material! [Muhammad/ Q20]

The choice of the curriculum course content plays a prominent role in the process of curriculum design because of its major effect on the 'marketability and acceptability of the course' (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 79). Choosing the topics needs careful consideration and investigation into the findings of needs analysis to choose topics that are compatible with students' interests and their acceptability of the course. However, it is not clear whether Muhammad means here that the course he intends to participate in is a content-based course, or he that he is referring to choosing the course topics in general. It should be further explored as to whether such a course of the latter type would be a useful means of language development. It is also very

important to investigate that the ideas to be chosen for the course are the most useful and communicatively effective ones.

Similarly, both Ramia and Omar reveal an interest in participating in the design of the area of the curriculum which comprises the associated activities and tasks. Ramia states, for example:

I would like to participate in designing new innovative and challenging tasks that go beyond the typical thinking that students are usually required to do. [Ramia/ Q4]

The choice of a particular technique or activity can bring certain learning principles to bear. Here, the choice of the activities and tasks should depend on an appropriate environment analysis to factors that might affect the success of the task such as class size, time, etc., and depends on further students' needs analysis as well. It also entails choosing activities which are of interest to the students, and which they need to be able to do with a certain degree of extra challenge in order to increase their motivation. However, students also need activities and tasks which boost their self-confidence. The trick is to vary the harder tasks and ones which reassure them that they can do it.

The idea of developing exercises that can increase criticality in the learners' thinking is also raised by Omar who remarks:

For me, the most important thing in the new curriculum is developing the students' thinking. So, I will focus on designing questions and exercises that widen their knowledge. [Omar/ Q21]

Some teachers also express their willingness to play a part in designing the reading passages for the curriculum in a way that widens the students' familiarity with certain lexis and more advanced aspects of the language. Asseel explains in this regard:

I would participate in designing reading comprehension exercises. I believe reading comprehension really helps improve the student's understanding of the language and familiarity with vocabulary. [Asseel/ Q11]

A careful choice of the reading passages is vital when designing the content of the curriculum as it involves the topic of the passage and the language items that occur

in the passage. This relationship between the two kinds of content, according to Nation and Macalister (2010), can sometimes be problematic for teachers in that they need to pay attention to more general language features which are important for use in situations beyond the lesson and the classroom, and are not only restricted to the passage they have in hand.

Sequencing the content is another important issue that should be taken into consideration when designing the curriculum. Curriculum designers should decide upon the sequence of their curriculum before they start to do the design. They need to choose between 'linear' development and 'modular' development for their curriculum. The former term is used to refer to materials that are developed based on the learning that has occurred in previous lessons; the latter meanwhile is used to refer to lessons that are developed and designed to be separate from other lessons and consequently the order of the lessons does not have any effect on the learning.

Although the overall orientation of the curriculum marks a very important step which should take place before considering choices regarding the content in curriculum development (Brown, 1995), only one of the participants of this study refers to the overall plan of the curriculum. In his thoughts about curriculum planning, Rami advocates placing less emphasis on exams and tests and increasing the focus on grades and the four basic language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. He states:

I would offer a more flexible curriculum with less emphasis on exams. Although exams are important, I would use one at the end of the year. In terms of coursework, I would have it in all four skills throughout the year and have it count more towards the grade than the exams. I would also like to see more graded course books for the very low levels as I feel these levels are neglected. [Rami/ Q14]

Choosing the learning and teaching techniques and the overall lesson plan is a very important part of the lesson. It is at this time that, following Nation and Macalister, 'the data gathered from needs and environment analysis, and the principles chosen to maximise learning come together in activities that involve the learners' (2010, p. 88).

It is also very important to pay attention to the logistics of the new curriculum design and the procedures in which this work will occur. At this level, it seems that encouraging the teachers to participate in the process of curriculum design is not easy, and careful attention should be paid to the working environment and circumstances of the teachers themselves. That is to say, teachers might not have the time to participate or may not be willing to make added effort without being paid extra accordingly. Analysis of the data reveals that the teachers would be more willing to participate in designing the curriculum content if they could see something in return for their efforts such as being paid extra or being promoted, for example. Moreover, some teachers suggest a plan for who they believe should participate in the actual design and how long this process might be expected to last. Leena explains:

It is a good idea if the teacher is given the time and resources needed for that. It will take a lot of time. The same teacher should be the one designing all the levels. Three teachers should be involved at least where they have to share roles between them! [Leena/ Q3]

Teachers' willingness to play a part in designing curriculum is very important in the process of curriculum development and evidence from the literature is enlightening (e.g. Brown, 1995; Richards, 2000; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Another issue that is no less important than this general willingness to play their part, is the teachers' tendency towards collaborative work. The idea of collaborative work has been raised by Ramia who emphasises the necessity for teachers to work together in order to achieve the best results from curriculum design.

They could participate in designing a new curriculum provided that they do it collaboratively and professionally. They are best to do this job as they are already immersed in the teaching/ learning process. [Ramia/ Q4]

Leena and Ramia all have valid opinions to offer in this respect. It appears that designing a new curriculum immediately and alone as a teacher would be considerably difficult, due to this task requiring much effort and time and the necessity of needing to share this load between the teachers. Every teacher is qualified and equipped to do a specific job in the teaching process and system. However, everyone can benefit when teachers share their experiences with each

other, often resulting in the creation of a much more comprehensive and inclusive curriculum. Cooperation among teachers is crucial too for materials development, where the positive benefit from their ideas and thoughts can be maximised when the latter are viewed collectively, and the outcomes can be better than those created on the basis of one individual's work. It is also possible that teachers' collective cooperation in curriculum development can minimise the amount of time and effort that needs to be assigned to projects, and it is more likely that such curriculum projects will be accepted and succeed (Brown, 1995, p. 173).

5.4.4 Teachers' role in curriculum evaluation

Curriculum evaluation represents a very important stage that informs the subsequent efforts in the processes of curriculum development and dissemination (Norris *et al*, 2009). Aware as they are of this crucial role of curriculum evaluation, the study participants provide some important implications for developing and implementing certain strategies to enhance and extend curriculum evaluation amongst the Institute's instructors. Nonetheless it is noteworthy here that teachers focus on evaluation was primarily as it being a means of achieving the curriculum goals and outcomes and of investigating the effectiveness of this new curriculum, rather than focusing on the actual uses and purposes of doing the evaluation. That is, evaluation is understood here by the participants as a way of gathering information about elements and topics within the curriculum (i.e. finding out what it contains in the way of workable material) rather than understanding the actual workings and structure of the curriculum, and then using such information and findings to develop, adjust, and improve the curriculum *per se*.

In this regard, and after expressing their attitudes regarding their contribution to the planning and designing processes, the teachers focus on piloting as the most important stage in starting off the curriculum evaluation process. Similarly, the teachers refer to the necessity of researching curriculum appropriateness and effectiveness as a complete and overall evaluation process.

5.4.4.1 Channelling the potential curriculum

Testing a curriculum is an important aspect of quality control of the materials and can help to ensure whether the time and investment has been worthwhile or not. The purpose of piloting a curriculum is to investigate its effectiveness and to make any needed changes before adopting any curriculum approach on a broader basis. This is also helpful to ensure a smooth transition and further development based on the collected results (Cummins & Davison, 2007). Piloting a curriculum helps to identify which parts of the curriculum are good and which parts need strengthening. Piloting the new curriculum can last at least a one whole year before decisions are made about it. The information gathered from the pilot is used to strengthen and to improve the content, materials, and teaching strategies in the new curriculum being adopted.

The data in the current study reveal that eight of the teachers were aware of the significance of piloting in the curriculum evaluation process. Their comments cover different perspectives regarding piloting and refer to the timing and the 'flow' of piloting and who should take part in it.

Layan, for example, expresses her willingness to take part in the curriculum evaluation process and especially the piloting stage. She states:

I'd like to give my opinion maybe in the evaluation stage during piloting the materials as to what some senior teachers might choose. [Layan/ Q6]

Similarly, Leena explains that testing the new curriculum is an important stage that will only be effective if there are enough resources, time, facilities and a capable evaluation team to revise the curriculum, based on information provided in the evaluation feedback at the pilot stage.

For evaluating the proposed curriculum, there should be piloting for at least a year before adopting the curriculum. And there should be enough time for teachers to be able to work on the feedback from the piloting stage. The Institute should also provide us with the necessary resources and facilities. [Leena/ Q3]

To ensure that the desired feedback from the piloting evaluation is received, there should be a high-quality evaluation team in place to review the curriculum. This

should be followed by a comparison with the needs analysis that has been previously carried out at the planning stage and together with the piloting evaluation findings that have been gained through testing the curriculum and conducting an evaluation study to see its effectiveness and usefulness.

With regards to who should participate in the evaluation study, Nadia states:

I think in order to evaluate the new curriculum, piloting should take part and all students, administration, and teachers should participate.
[Nadia/ Q1]

Similarly, Bahaa stresses the fact that each person who is involved in these courses should participate at this piloting stage. He remarks:

A pilot project with a few teachers and a few classes over the course of a semester would be ideal. EVERYONE [stress from original] should have responsibility for creating and evaluating a new curriculum. [Bahaa/ Q15]

Although the participants demonstrate significant awareness of the importance of the piloting stage in the process of curriculum evaluation, none of them have suggested how this piloting stage should itself be evaluated or what systems should be followed to link the findings to the development of the version of the curriculum which is going to actually be tested.

Whenever a newly-developed or adapted curriculum is used for the first time, a wide range of assessment procedures should be carried out, and the proposed curriculum in this current case is no exception. The participants here seem aware of the need for conducting an evaluation study based on the results from piloting the curriculum but they are modest in their acknowledgement and expectations of the significant role that they could play in this process of curriculum development. From my own experience of this particular teaching context, I can attest that the teachers' knowledge and experience have important implications for curriculum evaluation in Syria. At certain stages of the curriculum pilot testing only teachers who are involved in delivering the new materials can make any beneficial and meaningful contribution towards its evaluation. This could be by testing the materials themselves, comparing them with the previous materials and making use of their experiences in this field

and with these particular students. Here, again the teachers' observations in class are very important as they can gain information about the teaching methods used for implementing the materials and ascertain how efficient each method is in increasing the students' skills. Consequently, this can establish which teaching methods need to be changed or modified. Teachers' observations about the curriculum content can also be beneficial regarding: the depth; the structure; the topics to be covered; the language skills; the grammar; the vocabulary, and the communication skills. Observations can be noted as to the appropriateness of the materials, and to ascertain if there is any need for any other supplementary material to enhance the students' knowledge of certain language points. The teachers' role at this piloting stage can also be helpful in monitoring the timing and the flow of the curriculum and the time that has to be allocated to cover the materials. All of this is in addition to teachers' input about the effectiveness of the materials (i.e. if the students have acquired the intended knowledge base and skills from the language course). This is discussed further in the following section.

5.4.4.2 Effectiveness

Maximising the effectiveness of teaching and learning is the greatest aim of any curriculum development and curriculum change processes and as such assessing effectiveness becomes a crucial task during this process (Cheng, 1994). The major reason for assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum is to ensure that the goals of that curriculum have been achieved. That is, evaluating a curriculum focuses on making decisions as to whether the curriculum is producing or can produce the required results that the curriculum has been designed to achieve. Evaluation, in this sense, serves to identify 'the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum before implementation and the effectiveness of its delivery after implementation' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1997, p. 320). As the importance of the piloting stage in the process of curriculum evaluation has been discussed in the previous section, in this section, the focus here lies with evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum after the piloting stage.

The study participants' focus was mainly on 'summative evaluation' at the course or curriculum level, rather than the formative one, to reveal its effectiveness and

usefulness based on the students' and teachers' experiences within this curriculum. Many of the teachers stress the critical necessity of studying the effectiveness of the piloted curriculum and of some of the mechanisms in place to control the sequence of the evaluation process. Nonetheless, none of the teachers have detailed what an effective evaluation could actually entail or what means should be provided to monitor the quality of the evaluation. In their responses about evaluating the new proposed curriculum, the teachers have focused primarily upon gathering information about the actual characteristics of the curriculum, the associated activities, the outcomes and the consequences of the language course.

Teachers' responses to curriculum evaluation have varied as every group has looked at the process from a different angle. The first group of teachers have seen that the curriculum should be evaluated by considering and evaluating its main characteristics and components: such as the context of implementation and dissemination of the new curriculum; evaluating the students who are the recipients of this curriculum; evaluating the available resources, along with evaluating the teaching staff used to deliver the curriculum. In a response to an open-ended questionnaire, Asseel states:

Once it's completed, it's imperative that the teachers teaching it thoroughly, analyse it, and give feedback before publishing it. Both the context and the teachers should be taken into consideration while evaluating it. [Asseel/ Q11]

Another group of teachers focus upon evaluating the 'activities' that are employed in the class to deliver the curriculum as the main focus of the curriculum evaluation. In this sense, what is important for this group of teachers is how the teacher, as an implementer of the new curriculum, acts in his or her classroom to ensure the proper implementation of that curriculum. This includes evaluating teachers' practices and behaviours, the extra activities in class, the learners' behaviour with and reaction to their new materials, etc. Omar, for example, focuses upon the teachers and the teaching practices in class as a main factor of the curriculum evaluation process. He states:

The teacher is the one who is responsible for implementing the curriculum in the classroom. So the teachers' role in a new curriculum

is 'evaluation'. Teachers will teach this curriculum for a long time. Their observations in class and the actions they take will make them discover the strong and weak points in this curriculum. [Omar/ Q21]

In line with this, Kais suggests classroom observations as a means for curriculum evaluation, focusing at the same time on the importance of thoughts negotiation with the teachers themselves regarding the implementation of their materials and their own practices in class. He states:

I would like to participate in evaluating its effectiveness by collecting the different thoughts of different professional teachers and negotiating them with other teachers. I might help in conducting class observations as well to discover what works and what not for each teacher and compare these results with the ones from other teachers. [Kais/ In4]

The data analysis also reveals that the teachers' main focus in curriculum evaluation is upon evaluating students' 'outcomes'. That is, for many of the teachers, evaluating the curriculum means evaluating the impact this curriculum has on those for whom the programme is intended and investigating what improvement, if any, this curriculum has succeeded in achieving regarding students' language skills. One example of this is Hamza who says:

It should be determined if the curriculum meets all the requirements both administratively and in practice. Everyone at the Institute (including students-through surveys) should in one way or another be involved. However, only the students' outcomes should decide if the curriculum is successful or not. [Hamza/ Q16]

The teachers in the research study focus upon these three key areas: evaluating the curriculum's characteristics; teachers' actions, and students' outcomes. This takes the discussion back to the literature concerning curriculum evaluation (e.g. Anderson & Postlethwaite, 2007, pp. 7-8). According to Anderson and Postlethwaite, for example, any attempt at curriculum evaluation should involve collecting information about these three main elements of any programme.

The data analysis in the current study also reveals that more than half of the teachers discussed the evaluation instruments that should be used to gather data about the materials, in addition to their own focus upon the importance of specifying

the purpose and objectives of the study and identifying the decision-makers. Rami recommends evaluating the curriculum whilst the materials are being used:

I think managers, teachers and students should be involved. Questionnaires and interviews should be conducted at regular intervals throughout the first year of the new curriculum to ensure that it is being implemented effectively and is yielding results. [Rami/ Q14]

Another opinion about curriculum evaluation instruments is given by Ammar who adds to curriculum evaluation the idea of governmental support which is highly important whenever there is a need to test a curriculum for it later to be used and disseminated more widely. Ammar also defines another kind of evaluation, as he refers to sharing ideas about the curriculum with other professionals at other universities who have had previous successful experiences in curriculum development. He states, in this regard:

(1) The feedback given by the students and the teachers; (2) Collecting data (e.g. students' needs, cultural information); (3) There should be governmental support; (4) Suggesting new ideas and thoughts by holding conferences; (5) Coordinating with others such as the professionals and international universities that have experience in developing curricula. [Ammar/ Q18]

Ammar's views about curriculum evaluation touch upon three main factors: *who* should evaluate; *what* should be evaluated, and *how* it should be evaluated and *with whom*. For Ammar evaluation needs to expand from the confines of the Institute to reach a governmental and organisational scope. Literature on curriculum evaluation theories that has addressed the effectiveness of curriculum development and change reveals the importance of maintaining a link, between the organisational factors and the curriculum development and change (i.e. Cheng, 1994). One example of an organisational model for curriculum evaluation is Cheng's theoretical model. According to him 'this model assumes that curriculum change and teacher competence development happen in a three-level context of school organisation: the individual level, the group/ programme level, and the whole school level' (1994, p.33).

The participants outline several ways of assessing the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum and the teaching methods to ensure the achievement of the curriculum's

aims and objectives. However, their major focus seems to lie with assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum as parts rather than as a whole. This could be because it is widely believed that the measurement of a new curriculum usually is against the standard of the old one, where the focus of teachers rests with the weak points of what they are delivering to their students. Teachers have suggested evaluating specific aspects of the curriculum but very limited information was given about assessment of the entire curriculum. This could reflect the difficulty of evaluating the impact of such a development or fundamental change upon the curriculum as a whole. A group of highly-qualified and motivated professionals is needed to conduct such an assessment for whole curriculum effectiveness.

It could be argued that the teachers' views about the inevitability of assessing the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum are grounded in two areas. Firstly, there is a general awareness of the significance of checking the usefulness and appropriateness of the curriculum before proceeding to publish it, and widening its reach to a larger number of students. This was the main reason behind changing this curriculum in the first place, namely to meet the language needs of the specific targeted students at the Institute. Secondly, teachers' insistence on their participation in assisting in the evaluation of the curriculum effectiveness might be attributed to their fear that this experience could turn out to be similar to other curriculum change experiences in other educational institutions within the same context. This has been where curriculum development is used to include the planning and implementation stage, without any due consideration or awareness of the importance of evaluation in the development process.

Within these concerns, considering how the proposed curriculum is effective for both teaching and learning and what actually contributes to its effectiveness becomes a critical issue in any attempt at curriculum evaluation. For the study participants, this is comprised by three main factors: the students, the teachers, and the context. This echoed by Leemar: *'Students' satisfaction, achievement and progress. Also teachers' opinion and feedback should be considered too'* (Leemar, 2012, p.24). Curriculum effectiveness should be dealt with as a dynamic, continuous process that has the inherent of developing the teachers' competencies, the learners' needs and

characteristics, and the context's demands. That is the curriculum can be effective, according to Cheng,

'if it can interact appropriately with teachers' competence to facilitate teacher performance, help students gain learning experiences which fit their characteristics, and produce expected educational outcomes, under the constraints of pre-existing characteristics such as national goals, school goals, school management, subject content, educational technology and resources' (1994, p. 27).

Within these concerns, the inclusion of an on-going evaluation process becomes a key component for the effectiveness and usefulness of this proposed curriculum to enable educators to ensure and improve the quality of the new curriculum's delivery as well as its outcomes (Patton, 1997, 2008 in Norris *et al*, 2009, p. 5-6)

5.4.4.3 Evaluation of new curricula

Evaluating the data collected from the curriculum testing-pilot presents a decisive stage during the curriculum evaluation process. At this stage the curriculum is reviewed again and evaluated based on the participants' opinions in order to adjust or modify the needed change in it. It is very important at this stage that the evaluation team look beyond the curriculum products and outcomes by using the diverse kind of data that is collected by the evaluation instruments (Lynch, 1996). The evaluation at this stage should include the feedback that is collected from the participants of the pilot study which is considered as the central part in assessing the effectiveness of the new curriculum. That is, after having a good sense of what the data said about the curriculum, the curriculum and the supporting materials should be revised based on the feedback. Teachers' role at this stage is a crucial one as their subjective attitudes regarding their own practices in classes is very essential to decide what has worked well and what has not and to determine whether the curriculum has achieved its objectives in an effective manner.

This idea about teachers' central role in curriculum evaluation is expressed by many teachers who have participated in this study. Ammar's maintains that:

Teachers can provide feedback about the new curriculum and provide practical ideas related to the cultural environment. [Ammar/ Q18]

Similarly, this idea is also expressed by Yara who highlights teachers' central role in making decisions about what has worked and what has not in the classroom, based on students' reactions and their engagement with the new curriculum and also in deciding if the curriculum has achieved its goals and objectives. She states:

They [teachers] are the ones who teach the students. So they can tell from the reaction of the students and from evaluating the students' level whether they have made any progress after implementing the new curriculum or not. I think they can tell and after trying it whether it really accomplishes the goals and purposes of developing it or not. They can tell according to their practice in the classroom what are the strong points and what are the weaker ones. [Yara/ In5]

Omar, in a similar vein, even thinks that the teachers' main role in the new curriculum is that of 'evaluation' rather than serving any other purpose in the whole process of curriculum development. He thinks that this is the main contribution that teachers should make, as they are the implementers of this proposed curriculum. He says:

The teacher is the one who is responsible for implementing the curriculum in the classroom. So the teachers' role in a new curriculum is 'evaluation'. Teachers will teach this curriculum for a long time. This will make them discover the strong and weak points in this curriculum. [Omar/ Q21]

Omar's view of the chief role of teachers in curriculum development process as being that of evaluating the new proposed curriculum is a significant one. However, the teachers' role in curriculum development cannot and should not be restricted exclusively to evaluation.

In her opinions about curriculum evaluation, Layan views extend to the practical side of the process of evaluation and indeed who should evaluate. She explains:

First, there should be a committee evaluating the current one and looking for the deficiencies in it and then working on the ILOs (Intended Learning Outcome) for every level, and after that there should be a comparison between them ... finally the committee studies possible suggestions for alternatives. [Layan/ Q6]

Layan suggestions of making a curricula comparison falls in line with Brown's (1995) statement about curriculum evaluation, when he suggests that the curriculum should be compared against a standard, which is in many cases the old curriculum.

Equally, Yasser considers other factors to be measured while evaluating the new curriculum such as the effective ease of the curriculum and its smoothness. He says:

The good curriculum is effectively controlled and evaluated through its suitability for our students, achieving the desired outputs as well as its ease and smoothness teachers and students can take part in the assessment process. [Yasser/ Q19]

I think the ease and smoothness of the curriculum are two important components that need to be reflected upon when evaluating the effectiveness of a curriculum, as it is very important that the curriculum should accomplish its objectives without any difficulties or disturbance being experienced by the students.

Evaluation is a very important stage and it is even considered as part of the process of curriculum development and change (e.g. Brown, 1995; Richards, 2010). It is a process that sometimes requires a long time period of staff engagement: applying different methodologies and approaches for collecting data and for an evaluation practice that could help curriculum staff understand and improve their work (e.g., Mackay, 1988; Mackay, Wellesley & Bazergan, 1995).

The findings reveal that the participant teachers in the study are aware of the key role that teachers play in the evaluation process and also that they welcome and relish their contribution in designing the new curriculum at this stage. Teachers' views about curriculum evaluation can be summarised as referring to two stages, i.e. the pre-test and post-test of the curriculum. Furthermore, this is accordance with what the teachers have stated about collecting data about the students' levels before and after implementation of the new curriculum. The rationale behind this can be found in the literature. According to Tech (2010, p.4), for example, 'pre-and post-tests can be used to provide an objective measure of changes in knowledge and/or skills resulting from the training, and thus can serve to provide valuable information about the effectiveness of the curriculum.' Although sometimes a curriculum can appear sound and rigorous to curriculum experts sometimes (whether concerning content, theory or structure) the actual implementation may reveal that this curriculum has relatively little intrinsic worth for the teacher when implementing it.

That is, it may require teaching skills that the teacher has not yet mastered and require learning materials that the students cannot yet read. This shows why the teachers' role is a vital one in this process. The teacher's contribution can link the materials with the group of learners and the context of study as well.

5.4.5 Teachers as 'decision-makers'

Teachers' empowerment is one of the prominent themes that has emerged from analysis of the current data and which has been widely explored in the literature (e.g. Carl, 2009; Kelly, 2009). Teachers' reflective role in education has been seen as a vital one in the process of teaching, where teachers consciously connect their knowledge base and experience to the learning contexts and situations. Teachers' awareness of their reflective role in the educational process has been revealed through analysis of their responses to the research instruments. They have expressed their willingness to make vital changes which could lead to eventual improvement of the educational system in Syria. According to the participants, teachers should be empowered as they are the ones who have the ability to link their teaching experiences to their knowledge of the students' needs and the contextual needs, through observation, analysis and decision-making. Teachers' suggestions for a better English language teaching environment vary considerably and widely. However, the suggestions include the following: (1) keeping up with the newest updates in the teaching sector and the teaching methods and methodologies so as to cope with the developing of teaching theory; (2) More involvement of the students in the learning process and reducing the amount of teacher-centred classes; (3) Recruiting well-qualified staff and encouraging a more competitive atmosphere with an international scope; (4) Fostering better communication between management and the teaching staff, as the teachers are partners in the process as well as increasing teacher autonomy in the classroom; (5) Creating an atmosphere that encourages teachers' professional development through facilitating training opportunities and attending international conferences and seminars in the teaching sector; and (6) Developing a new curriculum that gives students the chance to interact, express, and develop their critical and communicative skills by using English in different life situations.

One example highlighting teachers' interest in being involved in making decisions about English language teaching in Syria is that of Ammar who stresses the importance of being involved and integrated in an academic English teaching environment. Here teachers will be assisted in obtaining further teaching skills and this will be positively reflected in increased learner motivation and performance in the language courses. Ammar also stresses the need for a change in the English language curricula. He states in this regard:

As people are more interested in the English language for an international world, I would like to change the whole scene of language teaching to have more and more new curricula regarding English. This will result positively in the educational process. I suggest we should hold more conferences and forums regarding the importance of English as an international language. Therefore, our students will be more interested in this important language. [Ammar/ Q18]

Similarly, in her response to an interview, Yara has some optimistic views regarding the future of teaching English in Syria and suggests having a more comprehensive and effective plan for teaching English language which is based on an understanding of the learners' needs and interests. She states:

In my opinion, teaching English as a foreign language has a bright future and the number of learners are increasing every day. I think that if I become a decision-maker I would always think of making an effective plan for teaching English. I suggest taking things easy and not overdoing it and exaggerating it by trying to copy the natives and asking the students to speak it all the time. However, we can spread the understanding of learners' needs when learners understand fully what their needs are teachers can help them to achieve them. [Yara/ In5]

Teachers' attitudes and suggestions for a better English language teaching can also be interpreted as evidence of the limitations of the prescribed materials they already been using, in achieving the desired improvement in the learners' language performance outcomes. Likewise, their suggestions highlight once more the top-down policy in this context, whereby the policy makers are the ones who make decisions about the selection of the teaching materials, regardless of the teachers' views and the learners' needs.

Viewed from a different perspective, other teachers like Leemar, Rami, and Iman have expressed their dissatisfaction with the educational system as a whole and do not appear to hold out hope for an improvement in the English language teaching sector in Syria. For example, Rami remarks:

Honestly, I think with the present situation of bureaucracy in the educational establishments and 'wasta' [nepotism & cronyism] and ad hoc decisions that are made randomly I do not see a better future for teaching English in Syria. [Rami/ Q14]

Rami has justified his attitudes regarding the future of teaching English within the current educational scenario in the Syrian context by linking it to some features of corruption like nepotism and cronyism ('wasta' in Arabic) with policy makers in the educational institutions. Leemar even aligns her feelings of distress and dissatisfaction regarding the future of teaching English with the corruption of society that goes beyond the Syrian educational sector to involve society as a whole, including other sectors like politics and the economy. Leemar believes that society should start by improving other institutions such as the political ones before moving on to the educational one. She states:

First we need to overthrow the dictators, then we can talk about development. [Leemar/ Q8]

In line with Leemar's views regarding the need to make vital changes in Syrian society as a whole, especially in its main institutions, Mariam stresses the need to make changes at the economic level which guarantee a better payment for employees in general and in particular for teachers, which could have a direct and dynamic influence upon the latter's performance in educational institutions. Moreover, because they often have to find other sources of income to support the one they already receive from the government, teachers do not always have enough time to explore extra activities that might lead to improvement in their teaching practice. In her interview, Iman states:

I would increase the teachers' salaries to the maximum before asking them to get involved in curricula activities and before asking them to improve their teaching. In my opinion, 'money makes perfect'. [Iman/ In2]

The attitudes of Leemar, Rami, and Iman reflect the influence of the societal context on educational decisions, especially the demands of the current times in Syria, which is witnessing a conflict without precedent. From a positive perspective, these special circumstances have opened the door for teachers to express their opinions freely without the fear of being suppressed or of losing their jobs. However, such circumstances tend to also highlight the serious disparity that exists in the wide gap between what is urgently needed and what is actually available in the Syrian context. Due to the extraordinary current situation in Syria, the teacher participants appear to be more critical and liberal in demonstrating their views regarding the general level of corruption in the country and its negative impact on wider issues that go beyond the confines of the educational institutions.

Teachers' attitudes regarding their participation in decision-making in general and in curricula activities specifically seem to be very optimistic. Most of the teachers regard the impact of their participation positively and expect to achieve some significant improvements in this respect. Their attitudes regarding their participation have varied to include all macro and micro aspects of the educational processes. Their attitudes have also stressed the fact that their knowledge, experience, awareness, understanding, performance, interest, and expectations are the ones that strengthen the teaching equation. It is also possible to read in their responses an echo of what Kelly calls for when stating that curriculum 'must be planned not by the politicians and their aides, but by those who actually understand curriculum' (2009, p. 271). The potential curriculum in the Syrian context should then create a space for a continuing development and understanding to learners and provide them with all aspects and opportunities to develop their thinking and offer them a kind of 'social and intellectual empowerment' (*ibid*, p. 272).

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a descriptive and interpretive analysis of the collected data from different perspectives based on the current research questions. Firstly, I have presented a description of various EFL teachers' practices using the current teaching materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus. I have then provided a description of the key findings regarding the main challenges and

obstacles the EFL teachers encounter during the implementation of the current curriculum. In the last section, I have highlighted the findings related to EFL teachers' views about the future of teachers' involvement in curriculum planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. Findings from the data which refer to the theme of teachers' empowerment have also been presented in this section.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

6.1 Introduction

In chapter six, I introduce my engagement with the findings and knowledge base (theories, previous research, and literature) that are related to curriculum development and change. The discussion in this chapter is guided by three main objectives: to investigate English foreign language teaching (EFL) teaching practice using the current English language teaching (ELT) materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages; to identify the main challenges of implementing and using these same ELT materials; and to explore how EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a new curriculum, and whether this involvement can enhance the quality of a potential new curriculum.

6.2 EFL teachers' practices with the current ELT materials

In the Syrian context, English is considered to be a 'foreign' language. Therefore, EFL teachers often find themselves in challenging situations, due in part to learners being less competent in the language. The dilemma of EFL in Syria is that it is left to teachers to navigate various ways and methods to address such challenges. This predicament is stressed by Christison and Murray (2014) who argue that when English is not commonly used within the immediate community, a greater burden of commitment and dedication amongst teachers is required for the classroom.

6.2.1 Teaching methods

The importance of the application and evaluation of teaching materials is a crucial aspect of EFL teaching. Noels *et al.*, (2000) indicate that the approaches of EFL teachers can be appraised from many perspectives which can include an assessment of the teaching methods procedures and materials, and an evaluation of the actual teaching practice, amongst others. EFL teachers are the practical and physical embodiment of any development of the EFL curriculum, as they use the methods and procedures in their practice. Similarly, Yashima (2000) observes that the teaching and learning culture in the EFL classroom depends on the themes implemented in the teaching approaches.

The findings of the study indicate that teachers at the Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus, Syria tend to use the 'communicative language teaching' (CLT) approach. Most teachers perceive CLT as the most appropriate method for teaching EFL. The importance of using this approach is embedded in the belief that the approach is effective in enhancing interaction between teachers and students (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). This is a claim to which demonstrably many other Syrian teachers, subscribe to, on the basis that the successful learning of another language depends largely on communicative interaction, as well as the relationship between the teacher and the learner. In addition, most teachers assert that they prefer the CLT approach in this context, as it is often successful in ensuring that the course objectives are met. However, it cannot be claimed that the CLT is the best method that could be used in this context. Instead, it is rather a recommended approach to language teaching, based on personal and anecdotal experience.

Some of the teachers' responses reveal an understanding of the necessity to vary their teaching methods to suit immediate teaching aims and the individual levels of their students. Some teachers use a combination of the CLT approach and other approaches to improve the efficiency of their language teaching in this Syrian context. It is possible to argue that such practices by the teachers portray them as playing a dynamic role where they can, not only challenge strict policy decisions, but where they can also orientate their teaching methodology in such a way as to nurture closer relationships with their students in the classroom settings. Although, the curricula planners, as previous chapters have revealed, maintain strict policies, some teachers feel the crucial need to challenge these policies and exert their own perceptions of 'what works' for their learners. It could even be claimed that the teachers resist, to a greater or lesser extent, the existing educational 'culture' and status quo by insisting on performing a more active role in their teaching, which might be considered as a positive contribution to and catalyst for promoting change. This supports literature that suggests that the approach teachers use in their classes may be largely informed by 'their personal hypotheses and beliefs, whether these theories are explicit or remain unconscious' (Hall, 2011, p.61).

As the findings indicate, teachers sometimes tend to use other methods too, in combination with the CLT approach, such as the 'engage, study, and activate' (ESA) approach. It appears that the use of a single approach coupled with the strict education policy in the case of Syrian EL curriculum has been neither successful nor fully productive, as teachers often feel marginalised. This is supported by Makarova's & Rodgers's (2004) assertion that a dynamic approach that provides teachers and administrators with flexible curriculum approaches in the implementation of EFL curricula should shift from an approach which strictly follows the official policy to an approach which changes according to the needs of students.

A dynamic approach to teaching is likely to improve learning effectiveness, as in essence it adheres to the needs of students (Burns & De Silva Joyce, 2007). The reality of teachers leaning on and relying heavily on existing theories and approaches to teaching can be a factor, which hampers the development of the EFL curriculum. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to carry out their own independent research based on their direct relationship and experience with their students to come up with teaching approaches that go beyond traditional theories (Peng, 2004). This is supported by the findings of the current study where teachers prove themselves creative enough to establish approaches and teaching practices which suit their students both when they are in and out of the classroom. This, in fact, cannot be achieved unless teachers are given an active role and granted the necessary autonomy and means to make their own contribution and valid addition to the process of curriculum development. Activities that extend the classroom environment to include out-of-class activities, as well as activities that aid in building positive and close relationships between teachers and students may indeed boost the learning process.

However, a combination of different processes could end up being detrimental: leading to confusion and a lack of clarity in EFL teaching practice. CLT seems to have been one of the most prevalent and popular teaching methods in recent years in many EFL contexts across the world, and the Syrian context is no exception, where CLT appears to have provided steady and acceptable progress. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the teachers in this study resort to a

combination of various approaches that go beyond the mere idea of simply a voluntary eclectic approach. There appears to be an aggravating combination of exacerbating and complex characteristics in the Syrian educational context in terms of: a) complicated student motivation and attitudes towards learning objectives; b) the disparate wide range and variation in students' proficiency levels, together with c) a lack of clear policy direction, or indeed d) broad gaps between theory and practice, amongst other factors. These factors tend to force the teachers, especially those new to the field, to find, out of sheer necessity, their own improvisation of new and immediate 'on the spot techniques', i.e. workable strategies to meet these challenges. Some of these include building close relationships with students, which extend beyond the immediate classroom context and conducting activities in other settings.

Argument about teachers search for the best method to be applied in their classrooms and their adaption to combination of methods could be even taken further in interpretation to support other arguments raised recently (e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003, 2009) that emphasized the idea of living in the 'Postmethod era'. Apparently, the notion of 'Methods' has been increasingly challenged in recent literature and it is no more becoming the main focus within ELT studies (Thornbury, 2006; Harmer, 2007). Methods, in this regard, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) states 'can be studied not as prescriptions for how to teach but as a source of well-used practices which teachers can adapt or implement based on their own needs' (p. 16).

The different ways in which teachers understand and implement methods in this professional context could be claimed to support this notion of a 'postmethod era' where methods are recognized as being the 'products of their times' (Hall, 2011). That is as Hall (2011) states, 'methods emerge at particular moments and in particular places as a result of the social and academic philosophies that are current in those contexts' (p.102).

Similarly, teachers' perceptions about involving students in making decisions in the curriculum development process reveal a genuine belief that their students can and should be the ones to have an effective input in their own education. In fact, critical

educational discourses concerning pedagogy insist on enabling learners' 'voice' especially when issues are relevant to learners' own education. While it can be challenging for curriculum designers and teachers to achieve successful inclusion, it is easy to argue that Syrian educators in the study do appear to be doing their best to achieve this. At the same time, it is important to take into account that inclusion remains difficult to attain, especially when devising and designing the prescribed teaching materials, and policy makers should be aware of this key issue, in their selections and proposed applications of teaching materials. Most importantly, teachers should be provided with a large margin of flexibility to meet any individual variation, which ultimately fulfils the demands and ethos of inclusion. Building on this and opposing an oppressive curriculum, it becomes essential to challenge the power structure and allow students as well as teachers to have a voice in the educational process; a voice that allows them to have contribution on what may be best for the learning process (Freire, 1994). Giroux's (1992) *Critical Pedagogy* is of central relevance to this argument. Giroux maintains that we need critical pedagogy, 'through which educators and students can think critically about how knowledge is produced and transformed in relation to the construction of social experiences informed by a particular relationship between the self, others, and the larger world' (*ibid*, p. 98-99).

6.2.2 Current teaching practices

From the study findings, it appears that EFL curriculum design involves considerable use of materials' adjustment processes, in terms of examining the relevant cultural aspects and teaching approaches. A critical investigation of different dimensions of the topic reveals that teachers' practices should be geared towards establishing optimum learning conditions within and outside the classroom (Su, 2011). Additionally, the teaching practices and materials used in the classroom should be designed in such a way as to enhance foreign language aptitude and mind-set regarding this, as well as integration, in order to facilitate learners' achievement in second language acquisition.

As far as materials are concerned, some of the teachers have expressed satisfaction with the textbook they currently have and they find sources of relevant interest for

their students in it. However, it seems that their views vary regarding certain elements it contains. There are some teachers who support the notion of the generality of topics and variety of contemporary ideas along with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach that is inherent to the textbook. However, other teachers see the wide variation, generality, and lack of specialisation as potential shortcomings of the textbook. Some of the participants' remark for example, that the textbook is 'out of date' and 'boring', and that modifications and amendments are required to meet learners' different learning needs and styles. In addition, although some teachers are satisfied with the intrinsic CLT approach presented by the textbook; for some practitioners the textbook lacks sufficient reference to cultural issues pertaining to the targeted learning group.

In fact, this apparent discrepancy in the teachers' views is an interesting one. While it seems that some teachers are satisfied with the textbook, others appear to be less convinced, when they consider the need for a more specialised and modern-day textbook providing learners with skills according to the new trends of language teaching. Both groups of teachers' views, in this regard, vary according to the perspective from which they make their judgement. Whilst variation is interesting for meeting a wide range of learning backgrounds the lack of specialisation in the textbook requires teachers to seek extra materials to fill in the gaps that the books leave unattended. This raises questions about curriculum design policy in the current context, which neither fully addresses learners' needs nor takes into account teachers' views, when selecting a course book and relevant teaching materials (Jesry, 2014). The prescribed suite of textbooks' inability to meet any significant variation in learners' levels highlights once more the wide gap between what policy makers believe to be their input to students' learning, and the actual needs represented by the immediate practitioners who have close contact with those learners. This, once more, places both the teachers and the learners in a similar position of demotivation and lack of agency as far as issues related to the curriculum are concerned.

The existing gap between those who select the books and the true nature of their learners' needs and the teachers' views about the materials, presents three main

themes with regards to the textbook: a) disregard for the cultural dimensions; b) a lack of facilitation of critical thinking, and c) a lack of continuity and integrity. The study findings for the current context reveal some restrictions in adopting the new trends in education, those which are consistent with continuity and compatibility, inclusiveness and the integrity of the key learning skills.

6.2.2.1 Considering the cultural dimension

The participant teachers in this study think that culture is ignored in the current teaching materials. With regard to the perceived lack of cultural elements, it is pertinent to cite (Kramsch *et al.* 1993, 1995, and 1996) at length to support the strong argument for the place of culture in English as a second and foreign language learning contexts. Kramsch *et al.* argue that 'culture' should be considered as a fifth language skill in addition to the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They claim that learners should be encouraged to take an 'insider's' view into other cultures, and an 'outsider's' view of their own cultural categories. Kramsch maintains that in the intersections of both the 'familiar' and the 'foreign', learners of foreign language negotiate new meanings, identities, and worldviews. She argues that the personal meanings that students create for themselves are best conceived as a third culture in their classroom (1993a, p. 257). In an age that is fraught with fragmented societies, new forms of social and political conflicts, and emergent identities, the issue of culture in educational context becomes immensely valuable to maintain the balance of the learning process.

By bringing these arguments together regarding the value of culture as a vital part of language teaching in the current context, the aim is to accentuate my perception of the lack of awareness on the part of the policy makers of one of the most discussed, researched and equally contested aspects of language learning and teaching, i.e. that of culture. This seeming lack of awareness, results in the policy makers paying less heed to selecting teaching materials which are culturally suitable for learners in this context in Syria. Many publishers of ELT textbooks have started to design and deliver their textbooks to specifically-targeted stakeholders, by means of paying more careful attention to various cultural aspects.

In contrast, the curricula designers in the current context appear to be unwilling to follow suit. In short, the study bears witness to the growing realisation that one of the current problems with the textbook is that it reflects an ideology of perceived power by those who decide upon what works for learners, without really considering what works in reality and from other points of view, specifically, those of the teachers and students.

6.2.2.2 Lack of critical thinking

Moreover, in developing the theme of the last section further, the textbook is shown to be perceived by the teachers as wanting in any emphasis upon the centrality and importance of integrating critical thinking skills into the teaching materials. Critical thinking skills are thought by the participants to reflect the new trends in ELT. Indeed, the textbook apparently fails to meet the learners' crucial need for critical thinking skills to meet the ever-changing demands of current times according to study participants. The heavy demands and stringent requirements of current times are varied and miscellaneous, especially in terms of the emergence of new and unprecedented conflicts such as that currently taking place in Syria, stressing even more the overriding need for critical thinking skills. It appears that at the time of interviewing (around the period of 2011–2012), the conflict in Syria was reaching its zenith, which might have given some of the teachers the license to approach this more contentious issue. Although it is beyond the scope of this research, this issue imposes itself into the discourse regarding the value of including materials for both cultural awareness and critical thinking in order to meet these challenges presented by the political situation. The more general point raised from the reading of the participants' remarks is there has been a rupture and continuing disparity between what is *needed* and what actually *exists* in the current context regarding curricula. This rupture and widening needs gap has resulted in some dissatisfaction on the part of the teachers regarding the current textbook. This appears to highlight the textbook's failure to help and facilitate students attaining and achieving the desired learning goals, as well as accentuating its negative impact upon the wider and macro issues that learners and societies need in terms of social solidarity, awareness, and understanding.

6.2.2.3 Lack of continuity

The lack of continuity and integrity of the textbooks and the different levels of learners appear to give the participant teachers additional concern. These themes, to a certain extent, are different from the previous two themes of cultural aspects and critical thinking. However, all of these themes can be reasonably categorised under the overarching issue of the lack of awareness of those selecting the textbooks about the essential nature of the target learners. There also appears to be a degree of failure on the part of those responsible for choosing the teaching materials, to carefully consider and explore new trends and thinking in curriculum design. In addition, some culpability may lie with the textbook writers who devise and design series of teaching materials from early levels to advanced ones in an integrative fashion to meet the cognitive and psychological development of the learners. There is enough literature evidence regarding the value of continuity and consistency in the teaching materials to match each linguistic and developmental stage in the students' learning process (e.g. The Scottish Government, Edinburgh 2010; Harlen & James, 1997).

With regards to other teaching materials which include: the workbook (WB); the teachers' book (TB), and other supplementary materials (SM), the teachers give similar views to the ones revealed regarding the textbook. In this respect, the inadequacy or lack of these materials to achieve the required learning skills is another significant problem discussed by the teachers in this teaching setting. Several teachers have demonstrated that they resort to using their own resources to compensate for this inadequacy. Although this difficult situation is perceived by the teachers as a major challenge to achieving their teaching goals, they claim that it can also be converted into productive and enriching input to any potential EFL curriculum development.

Equally based on the findings, several teachers express their continuing interest in self-independence and autonomy in their search for extra materials that can solve their immediate problems in the classroom. Since classroom issues are emergent and constantly changing: developing and honing one's own intuition is perceived as a workable strategy for success. Workbooks, teacher's books, and supplementary

materials often appear to be inadequate to ensure the desired academic performance expected by the students and other stakeholders. As such, teachers are often compelled to use their own personally-prepared resources as well as to teach themselves the requisite often unfamiliar teaching techniques that can motivate and enhance positive attitudes amongst students towards EFL.

In fact, the common dominant trend points to the use of extra teaching materials as being entirely necessary for teachers to bridge the gaps between the learners' needs and the supplied textbook (Johansson, 2006; McGrath, 2013). This demonstrates that in the current teaching context, teachers feel the need to go beyond the confines of the prescribed textbook to provide more relevant and even authentic resources to help them in their teaching practices.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, this suggests that there are shortcomings and a lack of suitability with the selected textbook. In turn this secondly suggests that this could be a result of the dominance and inappropriate centrality of policy makers' decisions regarding the selection of teaching materials. Thirdly, it points to the fact that teachers in this context are well aware of the value of varying teaching materials and keeping updated with the latest teaching trends in order to meet the demands of an ever-changing world. Finally, and most importantly, it could be inferred from this, that those responsible for designing and selecting the teaching materials are far from being in direct contact with the immediate stakeholders, i.e. the learners and the teachers. In other words, it could be concluded that they can tend to ignore the needs of the learners and impose upon the latter their own vision of 'proper' knowledge.

This assumption can be made because the findings from the literature review and the theoretical model indicate that optimal teaching practice must equip students with: a comprehensive and integrative orientation towards learning the foreign language of their choice: an open attitude towards various aspects of the language of choice, all supported by a favourable general socio-cultural attitude. Markus and Nuius (1986) claim that by utilising the appropriate material and optimal teaching strategies, the teachers are best positioned to meet all the learning needs of students and thereby enhance the learning of EFL (Iemjinda, 2007).

Although most of the teachers demonstrate an inclination towards actively contributing to the existing teaching materials, they are sometimes hesitant to transform this thinking into actual practice. Often the circumstances and various constraints in the teaching settings, prevent teachers from following through with positive additions and helpful modifications to the current teaching materials. Equally some of the better ideas are not always implemented as teachers can feel insecure when assuming change themselves. This in turn points to the idea that educational practice is governed by systems of relative power and hierarchy, whereby teachers who are ideally placed in direct contact with students are rendered unable to challenge the status quo and make any changes.

6.2.3 An alternative model for teacher change

The teachers' responses detail some of the techniques and procedures used in English language teaching and learning as expounded in the Syrian context. These themes are geared towards increasing learners' active involvement and interaction in the classroom and utilise inclusion strategies by following more contemporary trends and patterns in learning, such as active communication and role-playing. Nevertheless, other factors play a significant role in EFL teaching practices (Dornyei *et al.*, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 2006).

As such, the results of the current study are consistent with an 'alternative model of teacher change'. This is basically the assertion that the effectiveness of teaching practice is based on the ability of the curriculum to develop different forms of variables that facilitate the learning of the English language (Macalister & Nation, 2011). In this case, the 'alternative model of teacher change theory' proposed by Macalister and Nation (2011) focuses on the academic performance of students and the teaching practices that lead to change in various learning variables amongst students such as: attitude change, and the utilisation of appropriate learning materials in the classroom (Macalister & Nation, 2011). In addition, this theory indicates that teaching practices and materials used in the classroom work together and both of them must be considered in the design of any potential curriculum. This theory is consistent with results from the current study, with the teachers' proposals and insistence that optimal teaching practices and the use of appropriate learning

materials are fundamental to the realisation of a positive and successful teaching and learning environment in terms of cultural, psychological, and academic contexts. As such, teachers' practices and assessment procedures should be designed in a manner that facilitates the existence of a well-working teaching and learning environment (Muller *et al.*, 2012).

Therefore, the recommendation seems to be that the learning environment should utilise and be conducive to teaching practices that use the stipulated learning materials, and allow for the development of personal and individually-developed teaching materials. This approach is intended to meet the needs of the teacher's immediate and on-going cohorts of students in the EFL classroom, in order to enhance overall interest in teaching a foreign language on the part of teachers. As such, it is reasonable to deduce from the current study data that teachers genuinely want to implement teaching practices that both boost their own personal motivation to teach a foreign language and also result in improved academic results for their students.

In addition, the use of *appropriate* teaching materials in terms of clarity, and ease of understanding the information provided, appears to be a critical factor in implementing an effective curriculum (Dornyei, 2009). In effect, the findings of the current study in the Syrian context indicate that instrumental orientation plays a significant role in facilitating teaching practices, because teachers base their best teaching strategies on the use of a range of various materials and teaching methodologies. Therefore, the results corroborate with the existing literature.

To sum up, in the Syrian EFL context, it appears that two discrete 'groups' of players with regards to curriculum development exist: that of the policy makers and that of the teachers. It also appears that working and collaborative links between these groups are missing and there is tension between the two. Teachers refer to turning to their own intuition, experience and personal beliefs of 'what works' for their learners in their teaching practice, rather than to policy makers who may actually know more about the working systems and theoretical grounding of any eventual curricula. Nevertheless, the current curriculum does manage to survive and exist in a transient and fluctuated tradition of 'give and take' between curriculum designers

and those who execute the plans, i.e. the teachers. In line with this argument, it could then follow that it is natural and inevitable for any curriculum to achieve its goals especially in centralised education contexts like the Syrian one.

6.3 The main challenges with implementing the ELT materials

As indicated by the study findings, EFL teachers experience several challenges in this context at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. The most common challenges in EFL teaching include: a) challenges in professional development; b) challenges in materials' implementation, and c) barriers to achieving the EFL objectives and aims. Even though most teachers experience unique and individual challenges in the implementation of the EFL curriculum, these challenges can be classified into four thematic groups, which include: i) lack of motivation; ii) rigid administrative rules; iii) misplaced students, and time constraints.

The educational system in this context as in many similar developing countries is a strictly bureaucratic system with extreme rigidity. The system does not allow for any flexibility and any such attempt at deviation can be questioned and treated with suspicion, often being prevented or even prohibited. Although there are some systems that are less rigid and more accommodating and which actively encourage the implementation of an efficient and compliant EFL curriculum, most Syrian management systems are obdurate and intractable and considered to be a barrier to the implementation of any modified or new EFL curricula in the educational sector. As a result, the Ministry of Education in Syria is a product of bureaucracy, which can hinder the proper implementation of any EFL curriculum which is designed or delivered based on opinions and input from the teachers who are the primary implementers of the curriculum *in situ* in the classroom. In most countries, especially the developing nations, the curriculum development process is carried out by policy makers and other top managers in the education sector, leaving behind teachers and students to implement what has already been decided and detailed (Asmri *et al.*, 2012). As a consequence, teachers and students have not shown much interest to date in being involved in curriculum development, as they perceive that their involvement will only remain 'a mirage'.

Even though the strictness of policy and rules might work to the advantage of teachers and students alike, most of the times, it denies the inclusion of teachers in the development of the EFL curriculum. Consequently, this might not only lead to the development of what could be seen as an unsuccessful or ineffective curriculum, or the poor implementation of an existing one, but also to feelings of de-motivation and marginalisation by the teachers, as can be observed in the data findings. This highlights once more the general view from the teachers that most administrative bodies and policies view teachers as being passive and having little to offer in the way of input into the creation and design of the curriculum (Alwan, 2006). This, together with problems of the regular ambiguity of the instructions and a lack of flexibility, can create a negative classroom climate. Therefore, an effective management system in curriculum development, especially in the Arab world, is considered to be one that does not exclude teachers as active agents in the development of curriculum (Abdallah, 2011). However, this is not the case in Syria as teachers are not involved in any way in the curriculum development process. This follows research studies carried out by Asmi *et al.* (2012) and Alwan (2006).

Time limits and constraints constitute significant obstacles and barriers in the implementation of the EFL curriculum. Most teachers deal with the dilemma of uncertainty concerning the amount of activities to include in the course by considering the time limit allocated for every course. Accordingly, from the current study teachers claim that time limitations prevent them from including different activities while teaching and this can limit the amount of work covered in the course; thus making their classes boring (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). This seems to be a valid claim considering that language learning benefits from the inclusion of many varied and associated activities in the learning process, often by affording increased rehearsal and practice. The lack of sufficient time is blamed for the use of undesirable teaching methods such as issuing homework and assignments, which then detract from valuable contact time during the lessons.

Administrative problems and time constraints, amongst other factors, can often culminate in a lack of motivation by EFL teachers. A degree of this lack of motivation is evident in the current study findings. Teachers often blame their exclusion from

the curriculum development process as resulting in having disinterested students in their classes and being confined to teaching boring topics. These factors can exacerbate further demotivation and a general unwillingness to focus upon the delivery of effective teaching approaches. Consequently, de-motivated teachers' efforts to teach EFL well can be minimal which often translates into poor learning outcomes.

Additionally, the results from the present enquiry reveal that student misplacement also appears to create considerable problems in the implementation of the EFL curriculum, due to the fact that some students may be in the EFL class merely by virtue of having passed their previous tests at a lower level. This is in line with some researchers who argue that a rigorous proficiency analysis or an ability test should be conducted with students before including them in high-level and more advanced EFL classes (Liton, 2013; Craig, 2012). This problem or challenge is also related to the hierarchal nature of the instruction and to the rigid administrative rules that teachers have to follow. As tests are generally prepared those at a higher level of their organisation, teachers again reveal the feelings of being isolated and ignored in the decision-making processes regarding their classes, especially as they are the ones in direct contact with their students. Moreover, the issue of 'standardisation' is a compelling and controversial one. To many educators in educational settings in the developing world, the notion of 'standardisation' appears to preoccupy their practices with the underlying assumption that success in English language is equivalent to achieving the 'best level of language'. Yet, the controversy regarding what English to teach is far from being resolved. As Pennycook (2001), for example, argues, the context of ELT has started to recognise variations of English or 'world Englishes', which rejects the calls for one particular standard version of the English language.

Other than challenges in implementation of the curriculum, there are other challenges embedded in the professional development of EFL teachers. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) argue that successful implementation of innovation in teaching lies with teacher development. Challenges in professional development are evident at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. These challenges can be seen as being

related to the lack of teacher autonomy in class, insufficient training, and technological challenges. Consequently, these challenges can be interpreted as leading to many EFL teachers being unable to extend their professional development and being left behind regarding emerging teaching and learning trends. For example, the inhibition of teachers' autonomy has tended to result in a lack of independence and dissatisfaction in teaching, with most teachers being restricted to strict policies of conducting and evaluating their teaching only in terms of the final student results. Therefore, teachers can be denied the opportunity to evaluate their teaching and reflect on their students' abilities, actions which could have the consequence of significantly improving their own teaching practice and the professionalism of teachers in general. Such lack of autonomy exacerbates de-motivation as teachers are unable to take part in any in-service professional training whilst teaching. This lack of autonomy can also deny teachers flexibility in teaching, leading to boredom for teachers and students alike, which can result in poor implementation of the EFL curriculum.

Additionally, the findings reveal that many teachers indicated that the current EFL teaching materials do not provide the technological resources needed by teachers. EFL teachers in Syria require and need access to modern methods of teaching the language. In this vein, the Syrian Ministry of Education is to invest in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to be consistent with and adapt to global standards. Some of the study participants recommend that teachers should attend international and national workshops to enhance their professional development on matters that include technology. Technological approaches such as the use of audio-visual and internet resources have been found to be effective teaching methods in language classes (Yaratan & Kural, 2010). These avenues make teachers more competent at dealing with ICT and, consequently more knowledgeable about new ways of teaching English. The participants perceive using up-to-date technological methods in teaching EFL as an opportunity to use new ways and methodology in the teaching process that could ensure the achievement of the specific goals and objectives of any language course. This represents a more rewarding and communicative approach away from the old methods and the teacher-centred approach in the classroom.

Although the use of technology in teaching is of considerable value (Zhao, 2003; Papayianni, 2012), it is also essential for teachers to have adequate training to use such technology in the classroom as well as to receive the kind of support that is required for a better understanding of the mechanisms of teachers' practice regarding the use of technology in EFL teaching. In addition, showing awareness and some rudimentary skills in the use of technology is not enough as teachers need to undergo a full course of training on a consistent basis, before introducing this methodology with technology in the classroom. Otherwise, this may constitute a significant barrier against helping teachers to progress in their development process, which might then in turn affect their attitudes towards using technology in classes as posited in the literature (Li & Ni, 2011, p. 7; Bauer & Kenton, 2005; Papayianni, 2012).

Moreover, many teachers claim that they would indeed like to indulge in training programmes in their quest for professional development to improve their teaching practices inside the classroom, as well as to enhance the achievement and the learning outcomes of their learners. Teachers claim that the current education system in Syria is lacking in quality teacher training programmes. This situation is even made worse by the war situation now in Syria. Teachers attribute the use of traditional methodology in teaching to the perceived absence of effective training support while teaching. Curriculum training and support as an essential part of curriculum development and change is an issue that is widely reported upon in the literature (e.g. Shaw *et al*, 1995; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Seller, 2001), which all support the findings of the current study. Some of the teachers express that they need to top quality training if they are required to participate in any potential curriculum development as any lack of training during the curriculum development process could causes teachers to feel less qualified. This is corroborated by McGrail (2005). Teachers also claim that professional development can be undertaken through self-improvement programmes or professional courses, as described by Alwan (2006). Moreover, the teachers in the study claim that some of the training programmes in Syria are ineffective, as these programmes can often take the form of public lectures by academics, as opposed to more interactive creatively-designed

training programmes that are likely to positively affect learner outcomes in the classroom. This is corroborated by Asmi *et al.* (2012).

The teachers' views about the essential role that quality teaching training plays in the process of curriculum development are significant. The clear implication in this teaching context is that the provision of good teacher training should be given serious consideration before any attempt to develop the curriculum is made. One suggestion could be to establish effective channels of communication between teachers and policy makers for teachers to give feedback about their needs and challenges, to consider what kind of training the teachers particularly need, as posited by Alwan (2006). Training should also be evaluated through follow-up checks and on-going feedback on the teachers' performance, as recommended by Richards (2001).

There are other obstacles and challenges that the teachers face whilst implementing and using the teaching materials, which can prevent the achievement of the objectives and aims of the teaching process for EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. The main barrier appears to be the lack of awareness on the part of the teachers, which can translate into a lack of a deep, working knowledge about the actual aims and objectives of the EFL curriculum in the classroom. Most learning institutions tend to assume that teachers are automatically conversant with the aims and objectives of the EFL curriculum. Therefore, there is little effort by both teachers and administrators to ensure a complete working understanding and appreciation of these aims and objectives. This lack of awareness can lead teachers to be unprepared for teaching EFL in the classroom. This appears to be a common and notable obstacle in EFL classrooms in the Arab world in general, as observed by Abdallah (2011). There are of course other situations in which teachers have prior knowledge and understanding of the objectives and aims of the EFL course, but these may be beset by conflicts regarding the actual implementation of the latter.

In addition, results of the study also reveal that teachers perceive the glaring differences between the cultural assumptions embedded in the materials and the culture in which these materials are to be used as often an aggravating factor in failing to achieve the aims and objectives of the language course. The cultural

differences are widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Young, 2008; Saglam, 2010; Christison & Murray, 2014), In EFL classes, where students study English whilst living in their own country, students' ability to become culturally competent with English mores and traditions, as well as the language, is so limited, the students have little, if any at all, access to the target culture, or indeed authentic examples of the language itself. This can be an obstacle for the students to fully comprehend the language and its culture. Furthermore, the teachers report that the students sometimes respond to this by rejecting this 'other' culture especially when it clashes with their own traditions and religious doctrines. However, modifying the materials may not always provide a solution, as students also need to develop a degree of intercultural communicative competence to successfully function in an increasingly multicultural world and diverse environment (Alptekin, 2002; Hall, 2012). I strongly believe that developing intercultural awareness is essential for achieving the ultimate goals of any language course. That means that by completing a language course, students should not only demonstrate linguistic cognitive knowledge and development, but they should also show their ability to engage with any kind of text, as well as their adaptability to cope with communicative activities that focus on sociocultural components. It is noteworthy that accepting another's culture may include learning to appreciate many aspects about other ways of living, whether at the factual level; at a literary, artistic or poetic level with the art, literature, music, etc. of a given country, or at the interpersonal level, learning to understand different attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, customs, celebrations, as described by Clopek (2008, p. 11).

6.4 EFL teachers' views of their involvement in designing a new curriculum

6.4.1 Attitudes towards the introduction of the new curriculum

The attitudes of teachers are varied regarding the introduction of a new curriculum in their academic setting. The current study indicates that most teachers support the inclusive change to the existing curriculum. Moreover, those who support change recommend that change should take place only in parts of the curriculum that they do not consider beneficial for students, and which do not help the teachers in transferring knowledge. It is interesting to note that these teachers highlight that

there are equally desirable and beneficial parts of the existing curriculum which should be retained. On the other hand, there are other teachers who are opposed to any changes and who support the existing curriculum as it is. In the main, the teachers appear to feel that their contribution to the development of the new curriculum is helpful only in cases where the existing curriculum fails to meet their teaching expectation.

These findings are supported by the notion that the teachers' expectation level of any new curriculum plays a vital role in determining their attitude towards the creation, implementation, and development of the said curriculum (Castro, 2013). In addition, these results are consistent with the provision of a self-motivational system that indicates that attitudes are influenced by the desire to become the 'ideal self' (Kasapoglu, 2010). In this regard, teachers' attitudes are influenced by their expectations of the new curriculum in entailing various levels of language knowledge development for both students and the teachers alike (*ibid*).

The importance of adjusting the curriculum from the teachers' mood and standpoint is a factor that is largely ignored as most studies focus on the attitude of students. A negative attitude towards students could affect the outcomes of the EFL teaching in a major way. Therefore, these teachers put little effort into their teaching, which hampers the chances of students being able to learn English successfully (Castro, 2013). Equally there may be little care paid and disinterest in investing time and effort developing or improving the EFL curriculum in the Syrian educational system. In addition, a negative attitude may be detrimental to the preparation of even day-to-day teaching materials. On the other hand, a positive attitude can dramatically motivate teachers towards being actively involved in EFL curriculum development.

Furthermore, the attitude of teachers towards improving the EFL curriculum through their own reflection upon teaching approaches and materials is hampered by their dismay about their less privileged status (Alwan, 2006). This is further compounded by the challenge of the demanding tasks that they need to fulfil to address the students' various, and to an extent, incompatible learning needs. Therefore, a deliberate inclusion and acknowledgement of teachers' contribution to the development of curriculum is likely to motivate teachers to *want to* participate in the

process actively, leading to the eventual production of effective and relevant resources for EFL teaching.

The study findings also reveal that although Syrian teachers appear to be denied a voice and agency in the actual process of curriculum design, the teachers in the current study appear to be well conversant with the elements that are crucial to the development of any curriculum. As such they provide a visionary understanding of potential curriculum development processes that are based on the learners' needs. In this regard, teachers reveal views and opinions concerning their contribution at all stages of the development of a potential curriculum. These include the curriculum processes at all stages such as: the planning process; the design and implementation processes, and the evaluation process.

6.4.2 The planning process

The attitudes of teachers about their contribution to the *design* of the new curriculum, indicate that teachers emphasise the importance of conducting an overall needs analysis at this stage of curriculum development. This includes two main components: an analysis of the learning environment and an analysis of learners' needs.

6.4.2.1 Analysis of the environment

The analysis of the environment and settings is very important in the process of potential curriculum development as it provides a key factor for identifying the teaching practices and challenges that are faced by teachers in the context of this study. It is a decisive process in examining what other situational factors will strongly affect the language course (Nation & Macalister, 2010) and which of these might have a substantial effect on the content of the course, its methodology, and its goals and objectives (Tessmer, 1990). Environment analysis may include looking at issues involving the learners, teachers, or the overall situation and context of the language course. The current study data supports the literature which stresses the vital importance of context analysis (i.e. Nation & Macalister 2010; Christison & Murray, 2014), or how contextual analysis can be a neglected process as far as English language curricula or teaching materials are concerned (e.g. Tessmer, 1990).

For the study participants, careful consideration of the contextual factors, such as the cultural and political background, is seen to be of vital importance prior to the design of any curriculum. This is aligned to the dissatisfaction expressed by some of the teachers about parts of the teaching materials which they have found to be irrelevant or inappropriate at a cultural level. As they are the ones who implement and use the materials, the teachers are the most likely to spot mismatches between the context and the culture that is presented in the prescribed taught materials. They are the ones who have to decide which parts of the materials are most likely to be accepted least by the learners. This issue of lack of environmental analysis in the Syrian context follows other studies in literature (i.e. Nation & Macalister, 2010; Christison & Murray, 2014) which highlight some of the drawbacks of adopting ESL/ EFL materials from the main dominant English-speaking countries. Teachers support the idea of developing a curriculum at the Institute which encourages developing language teaching materials to be as close to the local community as possible, as this reflects the beliefs and values of that community, as proposed by Christison & Murray (2014). Environment analysis is also highly important in the process of curriculum development because it ensures that 'what happens is likely to be successful because it takes account of local situations' (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Despite recognising the importance of environment analysis, the study participants reveal that they have never undertaken such analysis before and consequently indicate that they believe it to be a previously- neglected process as far as the choice of ELT materials is considered. This viewpoint can be justified in Syria, because here the teaching materials come from above and the teachers are only considered as the implementers of those materials. However, Tessmer (1990) points out that, despite the perception of its overall importance to the success of an educational project in reality, environment analysis is rarely conducted as a main factor in the design project.

Therefore, this current study is an active attempt to persuade all stakeholders and those decision-makers and people in charge to fully take into consideration the

important role that teachers play in designing any potential curriculum in the educational context particular to this study. When viewed from the standpoint of teaching practice, the curriculum development in Syria does not allow for people's wellbeing overall, as considerable freedom is withdrawn from the teachers as well as from the students. Therefore, students do not always acquire the necessary knowledge, that is supposedly required, about, for example, democratic principles of human rights; freedom of speech, and other similar rights that are inherent in other curricula around the world.

An emancipatory perspective of curriculum development can only be realised with immense support by the government (Gadotti, 1996; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010). The government focuses primarily on cultivating citizens who are loyal to the state and to the ideology of the governing political party. In this respect, each citizen's own wellbeing is measured on the basis of how much is understood about the government's ideology and how willing one is to abide by it. The teachers, on the other hand, are still working under the oppression of government structures and systems. They are not allowed to teach what the government has not censored. In this case, they practice what Freire (1972) describes as filling an empty container with knowledge. Here Freire proposes a pedagogy that created a connection between the student, the teacher, and society in general. Freire's seminal publication (*ibid*) formed the foundation of the theory of critical pedagogy. It was dedicated to a group of people who Freire (*ibid*) refers to as 'the oppressed' and was based on his personal experiences assisting people of Brazil to learn how to read and write. In the publication, Freire refers to one of the class analyses of the Marxist eras to find out the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in the society, he also refers to such old pedagogy as a 'banking model' (*ibid*). This was because the design of the teaching programme conceived of students as empty vessels who needed to be filled with knowledge. Nevertheless, for Freire (*ibid*), new aspects of pedagogy should view learners as co-developers of knowledge. The students, however, would not acknowledge having freedom because the methods used during the teaching process to the content do not allow them to question, discuss, or object. Excellence is measured by a student absorbing what the teacher imparts in class. Curriculum development in Syria requires much improvement in order to attain an acceptable

international level, in which the results of working with such curricula in terms of students' achievement can ensure that students can effectively compete in the global employment market.

6.4.2.2 Needs analysis

EFL teachers in this Syrian context highlight needs assessment as being an essential process in the creation and development of curricula. This is because teachers apparently feel that the process provides relevant knowledge that is vital in the determination of the appropriate curriculum which enables educators to implement teaching methodologies and materials that are suitable for meeting students' needs. Additionally, teachers consider their contribution to needs assessment to be significant, because the latter is based on involving the appropriate people in the determination of teaching approaches and materials, relevant to the academic needs of diverse groups of students, which will ultimately be delivered to the students in the best possible way. This reflects the literature which highlights the need for curriculum designers to conduct a needs analysis of the actual learners to ensure the production of a curriculum that really reflects the needs of the learners who intend to study that curriculum (e.g. Christison & Murray, 2014). Needs assessment entails an analysis of the various factors that have the potential to affect both the content of the curriculum and the manner in which both students and teachers respond to a given curriculum.

Teachers' views about needs analysis in the current study tally with the results from other studies (i.e. Alwan, 2006; Castro, 2013). The participants agreed that the needs addressed within the prescribed materials did not necessarily reflect their own learners' actual needs. Equally these same teachers demonstrate an active awareness and understanding of the main issues and criteria relevant to needs analysis such as: the time of conducting needs analysis, the methods, and the procedures. This acute awareness adds to the literature outlining teachers' important role in curriculum development (e.g. Alwan, 2006). Results from the current study reveal that teachers are essentially capable of being involved in the process of curriculum development and therefore, their voices should not be ignored in the process. Both teachers and students should be consulted on a consistent and

regular basis and the learning objectives should also be changed accordingly. In addition, teachers should be supported and trained and given all the necessary facilities and resources to be active agents in the process of curriculum development. Teachers, for example, have suggested interviews, focus group, surveys, and questionnaires as the primary methods for collecting data for needs analyses. The importance of these methods have been widely discussed and reviewed in the literature (e.g. Christison & Murray, 2014). Such methods can be instrumental in informing teachers further about as the learners' identities, experiences, knowledge, goals, and objectives.

The study results also highlight the importance of conducting a systematic and reiterative needs analysis that is conducted with each process during the development of the curriculum. This ensures having more satisfactory learning achievements (Alwan, 2006) and accommodating all the changes in the learning needs (Brown, 1995).

On another level, needs assessment is a key factor as it ensures that the learning practices are tailor-made for the students in any given locality. The existing literature indicates that addressing the needs of students is essential to the development of optimal teaching strategies in teaching practice, as well as for the material used (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). In addition, the prescribed material should be such that it can be delivered in such in a manner which can improve and enhance academic performance for students in EFL classes (e.g. Alwan, 2006; Castro, 2013). As seen from current study results, the teachers tend to have categorise their students based on needs analysis that includes the following factors: individual variation of learners; innovative grouping of learners, and students' different learning styles. This classification takes into account the fact students have different needs, aptitudes and abilities in the classroom.

6.4.3 The curriculum design process

The results of this current study are consistent with some writers who claim that the teachers' attitudes towards their role in the designing and implementation of EFL instruction vary according to various aspects of the learning environment, e.g. Wat-

aksorn (1999). Teachers judge their participation in the implementation of the EFL curriculum differently depending on their perceptions of: the extent of their involvement; the associated benefits for students and themselves, and the aspect of academic empowerment among EFL teachers. The findings reveal that teachers' attitudes towards teaching practices and lessons in the classroom can affect the manner in which they interpret, change, and develop the relevant curriculum, as explained by Kasapoglu (2010). In addition, the participants realise that their attitudes are significant in the development of the curriculum because they can affect students' performance because the students depend on teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjects learned in the classroom. This is corroborated by Alwan (2006). The findings in Alwan's (2006) study reveal that teachers realise that their major contribution to curriculum development is often limited to teaching the materials and sometimes results in teachers undervaluing their role in the process. In contrast the results of this current research project appear to show that teachers have much higher self-esteem. It seems that they are confident that their knowledge and their skills can contribute to the design of the curriculum and all of the different associated curriculum development processes, and that they should not only confine their efforts to the implementation process.

Teachers' attitudes towards their participation in the design and implementation of the EFL curriculum vary. They include teachers who believe and support change and modification of the existing teaching materials that is geared towards capturing a deeper insight than that provided in the books, hence devising optimal strategies for teaching their students, as put forward by Brown (1995). Teachers feel that such forms of dedication and passion to teach appropriate and high-quality curricula is the driving force behind their attitudes towards their contribution in the potential curriculum design and development, as posited by Young (1984). In addition, teachers feel that their participation in designing the curriculum is dependent on the ability of the proposed curriculum to create a comfortable and pleasant environment that does not place unnecessary pressure upon students to perform to the expectations of the curriculum. Equally, teachers seem to be open to the idea of participating in the curriculum design and implementation process because it enables them to enjoy a greater deal of freedom, as they tend in any case to design

their own lessons, and implement the teaching strategies that best suits them and the needs of the students.

From the findings of this study, it is clear that teachers' attitudes towards any eventual contribution to a potential curriculum design tend to imply that they view the curriculum as a process and a task that needs to be carried out. These teachers' attitudes are characterised by personal motivation and harmony that enables them to exercise their ability to mould the curriculum into the optimal teaching strategies that best suit their students and make it easy for them to practise. In effect, such attitudes place teachers in a position of being passive recipients rather than active participants, with regards to the development and implementation of the curriculum, as claimed by Murat (2012).

With regards to the Syrian context, this study indicates that teachers feel that their contribution to potential curriculum design is characterised by uncertainty. These teachers feel that the uncertainty regarding their contribution to curriculum development can be attributed to the fact that they are not given the opportunity to design the curriculum. As such, this tends to engender them playing a passive role at the curriculum implementation and development stages. As discussed in the previous chapter, the climate of doubt and uncertainty could be due to the suppressive working culture in Syria that denies the active involvement of teachers in decision-making regarding the teaching curricula that is characterized by a top-down hierarchal power structure. Teachers are forced both to accept the directives of those who are above them in the educational hierarchy and to believe that whatever comes from policy-makers is essentially of great value.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that EFL teachers in Syria feel that they have a high-level of awareness and understanding regarding appropriate curriculum design with regards to the relevant topics for the learners at various academic levels but they are not always permitted any meaningful involvement in curriculum development. This corroborates the same points made by Abdallah (2011). Teachers' willingness to have part in the design of the new curriculum is borne out by the literature (e.g., Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Christison & Murray, 2014). In addition, the teachers reveal an active awareness of

the mechanics, tasks and actions required in the process of curriculum design whether it is related to the actual content of the curriculum or the sequence in which the content will be presented in the potential curriculum. This suggests that the teachers are more than capable in enough to take a positive role in the development processes required for the potential curriculum. This in turn implies that their voices should certainly not be ignored or denied.

6.4.4 Evaluation processes

Evaluation is a very important stage and it is even considered to be a main part of the process of curriculum development and change (e.g. Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001; Anderson & Postlethwaite, 2007; Nation & Macalister, 2010). It is a process that sometimes requires a long time of staff engagement, applying different methodologies and approaches for collecting data and for an evaluation practice that could ultimately help curriculum staff to understand and improve their work (e.g., Mackay, 1988; Mackay, Wellesley & Bazergan, 1995; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1997). Teachers' attitudes at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages seem to support and endorse the evaluation process used for the current curriculum. In the process of developing an EFL curriculum, teachers feel that they have a role to play in the evaluation of the curriculum with the primary aim of achieving the curriculum objectives and goals of rather than focusing and concentrating on the process of evaluation itself. The process of evaluation mainly is comprised of three processes, which include: piloting the curriculum; effectiveness maximisation, and evaluation.

Piloting is crucial as it enables teachers to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in order to make necessary changes as posited by Cummins & Davison (2007). Many teachers feel the need to be included in the initial stages of curriculum development through piloting. In my opinion this is fully justifiable as a wide range of assessment should be carried out whenever a newly developed or adapted curriculum is used for the first time.

The participants in the current study seem aware of the need to conduct an evaluation study based on results from piloting the curriculum. However, they appear overly-modest regarding their significant role in this process and what they can

actually expect from it. Based on their previous contextual knowledge, the teachers' knowledge and experience can have very important implications for curriculum evaluation. At certain stages of the curriculum pilot testing, only teachers who are involved in delivering the new materials can make a beneficial or meaningful contribution towards its evaluation, whether by testing the materials themselves, comparing them with previous materials or making use of their previous experiences in this field and with those of their students. The teachers' observations in class are equally important as they can gain information about the teaching methods used in implementing the materials and measure and monitor how efficient each method is in increasing the students' skills. They can also ascertain which points and methods need to be changed or modified. Teachers' observations about the curriculum content can also be beneficial in determining the appropriateness, depth and the structure of: the topics; the language skills; the grammar; the vocabulary, and the communication skills which need to be covered. The teachers can also advise about the supplementary material needed to enhance the students' knowledge of certain features of language. By involving teachers in the process of curriculum evaluation, they can play an active role, that may facilitate achieving a better understanding of the learning and teaching processes, as Richards (2001) claims. Grundy (1987) asserts that this entails teachers being the judges of their own actions and teaching practices.

Other than piloting, many teachers feel that it is crucial to consider the effectiveness of using the piloted curriculum to determine the capacity of the curriculum to achieve the required results before publishing it. Assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum is a key task during the process of curriculum development (Cheng, 1994) as maximising the effectiveness of the teaching curriculum is the principle aim of any curriculum development process. The major reason for assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum is to ensure that the goals of that particular curriculum have been achieved.

The current study data reveal that teachers are crucial to analysing the effectiveness of the piloted curriculum before publishing it. By linking this to the context of the study, the teachers' views about the inevitability of assessing the effectiveness of

the proposed curriculum are based on two factors. Firstly, it comes from the teachers' awareness of the significance of checking the usefulness and appropriateness of the curriculum before publishing it to a larger number of students as this is normally the main reason behind changing the curriculum in the first place. As a result, the language needs of the specific targeted students at the Institute can be addressed and hopefully met. Secondly, teachers' resistance to helping assess the effectiveness of the curriculum could be attributed to their fear that this experience will be similar to other experiences of curriculum change they have witnessed in similar context at other educational institutions.

In short curriculum evaluation refers to a simple assessment of if, when, why and how the curriculum is effective. The three main factors crucial to the success of any curriculum are the students, the teachers, and the context. This is expressed by Leemar, who writes of the curriculum development process: *'Students' satisfaction, achievement and progress. Also teachers' opinion and feedback should be considered too'* (Leemar, 2012, p.42). Curriculum effectiveness should be dealt with as a dynamic continuous process that aims at development of: teachers' competencies; the learners' needs and characteristics, and the context's demands. As a result, the curriculum can be effective, in Cheng words', 'if it can interact appropriately with teachers' competence to facilitate teacher performance, help students gain learning experiences which fit their characteristics, and produce expected educational outcomes, under the constraints of pre-existing characteristics such as national goals, school goals, school management, subject content, educational technology and resources' (1994, p. 27). Within these concerns, the inclusion of an on-going evaluation process becomes a key component for the effectiveness and usefulness of this proposed curriculum to enable educators to ensure and improve the quality of the new curriculum's delivery as well as its outcomes (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001; Kirkgöz, 2009; Norris *et al.*, 2009; Christison & Murray, 2014).

6.5 Teachers as 'decision-makers'

The study findings also indicate the necessity of empowering teachers to be decision-makers, rather than just implementers of the curriculum. This is vital for

teachers to link their knowledge of students and teaching experience to any new curriculum to produce optimum curriculum development. The findings of the study are corroborated by the existing literature (e.g., Harris, 2001; Carl, 2009; Kelly, 2009). The critical and reflective role that empowers teachers in the process of curriculum development stems from their knowledge of the students' needs and the context.

Teachers' marginalisation in the process of curriculum development could lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and rejection of or resistance to any potential curriculum change on their part, as Harris (2001) claims. Most of the teachers have expressed that they would be willing to make critical changes at an educational level for the general improvement of language teaching in the Syrian context, if they felt more empowered and were involved as decision-makers. Teachers have provided several examples, ideas, and even plans about how they would make changes for better language teaching scenarios in their specific teaching settings, and even in a broader sense in other sectors of the country in general. In some cases, some teachers' responses were contentious about the current educational and even the political situation in Syria. It is possible that the teachers' responses have been influenced by the current conflict in Syria. Because of the extraordinary current situation in Syria, teachers seemed to be more prepared to be more critical and liberal in demonstrating their views regarding overall corruption in the country and its negative impact on wider issues that far exceed the boundaries of educational institutions.

Teachers' attitudes regarding their participation in decision-making in general and curricula activities specifically seem to be very optimistic. Most of the teachers look at the impact of their participation positively and expected to achieve some serious improvements in this regard. Their attitudes regarding their participation vary to include all macro and micro aspects of the educational process. Their attitudes also stress the fact that their knowledge, experience, awareness, understanding, performance, interest, and expectations are the factors which will ultimately strengthen and enhance teaching practice. Their responses also echo what Kelly's (2009) calls for, when stating that curriculum 'must be planned not by the politicians

and their aids, but by those who actually understand curriculum (*ibid*, p. 271)'. This also supports the argument of Apple (1997) who advocates a shift in the power in favour of teachers, and Webb (2002) who recommends training teachers to be more aware that they have rightful power in the process of curriculum change. Similarly, Radnor *et al.* (1995) calls teachers to be empowered to claim their voice in educational issues that they think they need to change.

Based on this argument, I believe any potential new curriculum in the Syrian context should then create a space for the empowerment of teachers and for continuing development and learners' enhanced understanding, by providing teachers with all aspects and opportunities to develop their thinking and offer them a kind of 'social and intellectual empowerment' (Kelly, 2009, p. 272).

6.6 Summary

This chapter explores possibilities and further avenues for establishing theories and concepts relevant to curriculum development and change informed by the findings of this particular research context. It is reasonable to consider the Syrian context to be a unique and particular case. It is certainly an ambivalent one in that it oscillates between two different directions in terms of its quest for EFL curriculum development. On the one hand, it emphasises national consolidation and ethnocentric identity. On the other, it seeks to catch up with the mainstream trends that prevail in Western contexts. That is to say, this process fluctuates *to and from* these Eurocentric models. This ambivalent case has created an enduring relationship between the 'centre' and the 'margins' as represented in the Syrian case. The discussion in the above text has been guided by the key objectives of the research study namely: to investigate EFL teachers' practices with the current ELT materials at the Institute; to identify the main challenges in implementing these ELT materials in this same context; and to explore how EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a new curriculum and whether this involvement can have any positive effects on increasing the quality of a new potential curriculum.

Regarding the first objective; the study has found that the current EFL teaching materials enable teachers to use practices such as balancing pace, re-grouping and

clustering of students, as well as using various textbooks at the Higher Institute of Languages at Damascus University.

With regards to the second objective, which is concerned with challenges in ELT materials and curriculum implementation, it was found that various problems such as: lack of motivation; rigid administrative rules; misplaced students; time limitations; barriers to learners' achievement of their goals and objectives and professional development challenges all play their part in inhibiting the total success of the Syrian EFL curriculum.

Finally, regarding the teachers' attitudes, the findings indicate that EFL teachers have differing attitudes towards the design and implementation of the potential new EFL curriculum and their involvement with this. There is an overriding perception that the curriculum is merely a product and a necessary and unwanted task that needs to be carried out. It appears that the key lies with providing the teachers with the personal motivation and harmony to enable them to exercise their ability to mould the curriculum into optimal teaching strategies and practice. Furthermore, these EFL teachers appear to believe that their potential contributions to future curriculum design is characterised by uncertainty and a high-level of awareness of what could be done were they to be allowed to contribute and be involved in the curriculum development process. This is all underpinned by their recognition and understanding regarding appropriate curriculum designs, together with their mixed reactions towards changes with the existing curriculum; needs assessment, and process evaluation.

CHAPTER VII

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The tension between educational policy-makers and educational practitioners has long characterised education and there has often been a strained relationship between those who manage and direct education, and teachers, especially in the process of curriculum design and development. Furthermore, this tension has spread beyond the design process of the curriculum to its implementation in the classroom: that is affecting the output to the receiving students being a sort of activity audience. This important issue provides the underlying rationale for this current qualitative and descriptive investigation into the essential nature of the processes and development of English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula in the higher education system of Syria.

The aim of the current study was to analyse English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' attitudes to and experiences of curriculum change and development at the (ELT) department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages.

This chapter identifies some of the implications of the findings, and the contributions the research has made. In addition, the chapter outlines some avenues for further research on the same or related topics.

7.2 Summary of the main findings

This section of the thesis gives an overview of the complete enquiry in relation to its overall aims, objectives, and findings.

One of the main aims of the study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of EFL teachers' attitudes to and experiences of curriculum change and development in the ELT department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages, Damascus University. Syria considers English as a second language and as such its EFL curriculum is not well-established. Over the last two decades, up to the current time of carrying out this empirical study, i.e. 2011, Syria had witnessed some major changes in its educational system and departments. Educational change in the Syrian context is

seen as an important means of keeping the citizens updated with other external events taking place globally. In 2009, the Ministry of Education in Syria decided to make some major changes to the EFL curriculum in an attempt to make its citizens more competent in and familiar with the English language, at the same time as making it easier for the nation to modernise and adopt and incorporate much more information communication technology (ICT).

However, it is arguable that little has been accomplished and therefore, as part of the strategic guidelines of reform in higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education has shown interest in investing in research at higher education institutions. The Ministry has also shown an interest in establishing research programmes for creating appropriate evaluation mechanisms and methods concerning curricula and institutions for learning English as a foreign language.

In evaluating the strategy by the Syrian government, this study has been guided by three objectives: a) to investigate EFL teachers' practices with the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages; b) to identify the main challenges in the implementation of these same materials in teaching practice at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages; and c) to explore how EFL teachers view their involvement in designing a new curriculum and whether this involvement can have any positive effects on the quality of a new curriculum.

Using an interpretative research design, the study utilised semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires as primary data collection methods to elicit the views of EFL teachers in the English Department at the Higher Institute of Languages of Damascus University. It was observed that the EFL teachers mainly use communicative language teaching approaches for their progressive teaching methodology.

The second objective is concerned with challenges with the ELT materials and implementation. It was found that various issues such as lack of motivation; rigid administrative rules; students paced at the wrong level; time limitations and constraints; various barriers to learning goals and objectives, and professional

development challenges all combine to restrain and curtail the success of the Syrian EFL curriculum.

Finally, the findings regarding EFL teachers' viewpoints indicate that they have different attitudes towards the design and implementation of the new EFL curriculum. These mainly involve the perceptions that curriculum is a task that needs everyone's input to implement. They also involve the perception that the personal motivation and cooperation which enable teachers to shape the curriculum into the best possible formats for their teaching ought to be fostered and encouraged. In addition, teachers seem to have the notion that their contribution to potential curriculum design is dogged by uncertainty and that they have high-levels of awareness and understanding regarding relevant and appropriate curriculum design, which is often disregarded by those who make decisions about the curriculum. It is clear that they have mixed reactions to changing the existing curriculum, as well as to needs assessment and process evaluation. These findings corroborate the existing literature in the field of curriculum design and development to a certain extent, and diverge in other cases. This can give valuable insight into the subject of curriculum change and development, adding to knowledge as far as the context of Syrian Higher Institutes of Languages is concerned.

7.3 Contributions to the literature

The findings fill a gap in the literature about EFL teachers' attitudes and experience of curriculum change and development, as seen from the perspective of the teachers in the ELT department at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus. Firstly, researchers and academics in the field of education appear to emphasise the significance of teachers' participation in curriculum (e.g. Alwan, 2006; Kasapoglu, 2010; Castro, 2013). The findings from the current study also indicate that there are a number of teaching approaches used by teachers to implement the EFL curriculum in the classroom, including, for example, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, the engage, study and activate (ESA) approach, the translation approach and grammar approach.

However, the findings of this study reveal, that as a result of the strict adherence to the educational policy stipulated by the Syrian Ministry of Education and its administrators, the quality of the EFL curriculum development and its implementation has been somewhat compromised. It is clear that Syrian teachers mainly use the CLT approach because it is the dominant approach and methodology underlying the prescribed EL teaching materials. A key recommendation of this study is, therefore, that it would be preferable for the EFL curriculum to focus on a dynamic approach toward teaching that combines some elements of all the other approaches in a way that increases the effectiveness in delivering good learning outcomes for all students. If a dynamic approach is used, it could include all of the important concepts of each (as previously mentioned) teaching approach through a more active approach to teaching (Abdullah, 2011).

Research conducted by Makarova and Rodgers (2004), asserts that a dynamic approach which provides teachers and administrators with flexible curriculum approaches in the implementation of an EFL curriculum should shift from a strict policy approach to an approach that changes according to the needs of students and their teachers. It supports the shift away from the conventional concept of method toward a condition of the postmethod (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). However, the findings from the current research reveal otherwise, i.e. that this shift of approach is not always automatic, inevitable, encouraged or at all viable in some countries and their educational institutions. This rather bleak and negative outlook adds to the body of knowledge in that the teachers who participated in the study clearly believe that such strict educational policies are not always appropriate for the curriculum, because they can prevent teachers from being fully creative in their teaching. Consequently, there has been some criticism of the current curriculum whose appropriateness to the Syrian context is debatable.

Moreover, the modern world is developing rapidly, partly because most organisations are usually able to learn from the past practices of other organisations (Zughoul, 2003). The current study acknowledges these changes and provides such a platform for rapid development in the Syrian educational sector. The fact that success can be emulated from one organisation by another, means that even the

education system can adjust and develop theoretical approaches of developing curricula and teaching approaches that aim at meeting the different needs of teachers (Couto & Towersey, 2002; Zughoul, 2003). In this context, the educational system would be in line with some of the fastest-growing industries in the world.

According to the literature, a reliance on traditional theories in education can be detrimental to the success of any educational endeavour. Often the opinions of teachers as key stakeholders in the education sector in many countries, especially those in developing countries, simply have not been considered (Alwan, 2006; Carl, 2009). In addition, teachers are typically forced to adopt and use systems that are not amenable to them. The current findings reflect the existing literature in this regard.

This may be because teachers appear to have relatively low regard for the present teaching materials since the latter tend to limit and restrict their teaching. The teachers in this study provide their perceptions of the curriculum as they experience it personally. However, they go beyond simply providing their perceptions. They describe unique and original ideas about how the curriculum could be improved. It appears that these teachers are recommending what should be undertaken and done with the curriculum instead of accepting the current teaching materials unconditionally.

This study contributes to the existing literature by discussing the fundamental problem of curriculum design and development, i.e. by not adopting dynamic mechanisms of strategies for change. As such, it can be concluded that by addressing some of the more problematic issues inherent in curriculum design and development, as well as other problems that face foreign language education, it could be easier to teach EFL the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. Additionally, this research indicates that some of the problems encountered in the teaching and learning process stem from problems embedded in curriculum development. The curriculum forms the backbone of any effective implementation of teaching objectives, as such it acts as a lodestar for teachers in the process of teaching by providing clear guidelines. Therefore, a good curriculum will yield good results if implemented properly, whilst a poor curriculum is likely to create problems during

the implementation phase (e.g. Lamie, 2005; Smith & Southerland, 2007; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Purgason, 2010).

7.4 Implications

This study reveals salient issues in curriculum development including the efforts of teachers in using materials and different teaching approaches. In addition, the study identifies a number of challenges that are likely to be encountered by teachers in their quest to develop effective curricula for EFL students. The inquiry also reveals the attitudes of teachers towards the current EL curriculum and their possible involvement in the next curriculum development process. In conclusion, this study focuses mainly on the possibility of a potential contribution by teachers to the design and development of an EFL curriculum in the Syrian educational system as far as EL curriculum is concerned. Based on the findings, the current study presents the following implications for educational policy makers and teachers.

7.4.1 Pedagogical contributions and implications

Pedagogy describes the art and science of education and is informed mainly by instructional theory. It is concerned with the process in which the instructor or teachers acquire conceptual knowledge and translate them into practice, through an effective process of management of learning activities (Bernstein, 2007). The current enquiry is concerned with the EFL curriculum development process, and English language teachers' involvement with it in the Syrian context. Ideally, teachers, as mentors to their students, know the content of curriculum which should be delivered to students in the classroom, and, therefore, they are key players in curriculum development. An important aspect of this study is that it considers the development of EFL curriculum pedagogy. Consequently, this study contains salient information about the development of curriculum, particularly about the inclusion of teachers in the design process.

This study contributes to the pedagogy of EFL curriculum in that it confronts face on the serious issue of marginalisation of teachers in the design and development of curriculum. This can subsequently strongly affect the ways in which students are taught. Furthermore, this study highlights both the practical and theoretical realities

associated with the planning and development of curricula, as well as the implementation of the language curriculum at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages. Much of the existing literature distinguishes between teachers who implement curriculum and administrators who choose the teaching curriculum. This marginalisation seems to be a real cause of low teacher morale, due to teachers' general feeling of exclusion, as well as a lack of comprehension of the actual content of the curriculum on their part (Zou, 2012; Brinton, 2003).

Therefore, this study stresses that it is critical for teachers to both understand the concepts behind their teaching materials, and to understand the goals and objectives underlying the EFL curriculum. This assumption is presented based on the understanding that teachers who are allowed to develop a curriculum would have first-hand knowledge of which particular elements should be included and excluded from the curriculum (Carroll, 2007). However, this is not always taken into account by the Syrian Ministry of Education, resulting in many seeming flaws in the current EFL curriculum. The most significant conclusion that can be drawn from the findings here is that teachers and students are not included in curriculum development and change.

Subsequently, the exclusion of teachers in the design of curriculum might also lead to a situation in which teachers have to choose between actually finishing the syllabus and teaching it effectively. The pressure applied by the Ministry of Education and the administrators upon the teacher to finish the syllabus means that at times teachers have to choose which items to include and exclude (Gardner, 2002). A combination of pressure to meet deadlines and the inability to incorporate learning activities important in English studies' pedagogy, can lead to a loss of motivation. This can also lead to an inadequate implementation of the curriculum, and students suffer instead of benefiting from the system (Gardner & Lambert, 2002). Teachers understand that students have different abilities and capacities to learn. Therefore, knowledge of this factor will aid the achievement of academic excellence when teachers provide the appropriate material for their students. While some students learn well through theoretical application, others learn better through diagrammatic representation and the inclusion of activities in the learning process, as well as the

use of dynamic teaching methods. Therefore, developing an effective curriculum calls for a combination of both aspects to create success and motivation in the process of teaching (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

As outlined throughout the whole study, teachers' attitudes have a significant influence upon what actually takes place in the classroom. Furthermore, giving them an active 'voice' would be very helpful for identifying the main issues concerning both curriculum change and all the different processes of curriculum development. Listening to teachers' views and opinions regarding their classroom practices and the curriculum they use exposes some of the limitations and challenges they regularly encounter and highlights the kind of support they need.

The need to take teachers' attitudes into consideration throughout all the different stages of curriculum development is one of the more significant recommendations generated by the study. Investigating the teachers' viewpoints has the potential to provide profound and meaningful insight into many aspects of curriculum change. It can also indicate the extent of perceived professional development in teacher training. In this regard, I recommend that policy-makers should take into account what teachers' think, feel, and do whilst implementing a curriculum. This has the potential for the teachers to take preventive actions, and make the appropriate decisions about planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating any potential curriculum (Kasapoglu, 2010). The clear implication here is that policy makers should be more aware of the mindsets that the teachers develop during any change and development process.

Understanding and appreciating what teachers do and think is also important as it can help to ensure that teachers support eventual change in the classroom. The alternative outcome is that the new curriculum could be resisted by teachers (Castro, 2013). As seen by the data, teachers' motivation and sense of satisfaction was also considered to be a contributing factor to the success of the curriculum, which could be also be reflected by the students' enhanced motivation and interest. However, this cannot be achieved without policy makers taking serious account of teachers' attitudes towards any eventual new situation.

7.4.2 Teachers' attitudes towards recognition and professional development

As seen in the research data, overall teachers responded positively to the notion of EFL curriculum development in general. They perceived it as contributing to their professional development in teaching, especially at the level of gaining more experience and feeling more involved and motivated. Teachers' attitudes showed that regardless of all the challenges they have whilst implementing the current teaching materials, they try hard to benefit from the positive elements within those materials and to adjust and adapt irrelevant or inappropriate elements for better teaching and lessons. From personal experience, I can attest that this is far from being uncommon for English teachers at the Higher Institute of Languages. It could be argued that this steely determination derives from their inner motivation to become better teaching professionals. Professional development, therefore, is seen as a priority for these teachers. They also view their contribution to curriculum development as forming a vital part of their overall professional development.

Moreover, EFL teachers at the Institute perceive their participation in any potential curriculum development as an opportunity for them to reveal themselves as highly qualified teachers who can use their experience and knowledge to overcome any challenges they may have with any current teaching materials they are used to teaching or that they may use in the future. Teachers' general attitude of welcoming their contribution to the development of the potential curriculum demonstrates openness to a process of change along with all its difficulties that can add to their professional development. This concurs with Bailey *et al.* who stress the necessity for teachers to follow a continuous pursuit of professional development. They state, 'professional development is not something that just happens: it must be actively pursued' (2001, p.246). According to Bailey *et al.* (2001), teachers should always find in themselves a source for their own inspiration in continuous development.

However, unlike the participant teachers in Castro's (2013) study who felt themselves supported and valued by their administrator's and change leaders, teachers in my study reveal considerable lack of recognition from their institution and from the decision makers. The teachers see this as an obstacle in the way of their professional development. This was clearly revealed in the teachers' responses

concerning their contribution in the development of a potential curriculum in the context of the Institute. For these teachers, although their contribution might have a positive effect upon their professional development and work experience, they find it to be pointless exercise, if they do not find a supportive response from the management which recognises their efforts, time, and their financial needs. In this regard, my strong recommendation here would be for educational policy-makers to pay more attention to teachers' overarching need to be recognised and appreciated for their, efforts, time, and professionalism. Teachers have a strong need and desire to find the ideal environment for them to be able to improve and excel in their profession. This recognition and value could be achieved, as suggested by Troudi (2007), by giving them unconditional respect and gratitude and by creating a good working environment for them where they are supported both emotionally and financially.

7.4.3 The extent of teachers' involvement in EFL curriculum development

Excluding teachers from decision-making in curriculum development can only have a negative impact upon the quality of the developed curriculum and may even result in increasing teachers' detachment and dissatisfaction. Therefore, the teachers' voice should be taken into account in any attempt for curriculum change, development, reform, or adjustment.

Based on the current findings, the strict and over-emphasised centrality of the curriculum leads to lack of motivation and boredom from both the students and teachers as the curriculum does not meet the direct needs of students in the classroom. Teachers appear to desire a more autonomous professional atmosphere in which to participate in the design and development of flexible and effective EFL curricula. To this end, and as reflected in this study, there is a general call and requirement for there to be a shift in the essential nature and approach of the rigid centrality currently experienced in policy development to a different form of flexibility. Therefore, it is recommended that policy makers reconsider their stance and allow the active involvement of teachers in the curriculum development process. Similarly, the research also accentuates the importance of placing students' needs at the forefront of attention and care during curriculum design and development. As such,

the inclusion of teachers is quite crucial in the development of the aims and objectives of the new proposed curriculum because they understand the educational needs of students (Carroll, 2007).

In this regard, and as highlighted in the data, the teachers' 'voice' should be emancipated and fully present and active at all stages of curriculum development; in the planning; in the design, and implementation and then in the evaluation of the new curriculum.

For this purpose, the recommendation is to create a more supportive environment to nurture teachers' contribution in the whole process. This should include providing teachers with all the facilities needed for this purpose such as: teaching resources; internet access; educational activities; training attending international conferences, etc., in addition to the funding and the time that curricula development generally require.

Other immediate challenges may even include inappropriate cultural content in the textbook as pointed out by some of the participants. Above all, teachers should be given the chance to have their say in designing a new curriculum that best suits their teaching requirements, students' needs, and contextual issues. Therefore, this research indicates not allowing the active participation of teachers in curriculum design only acts to the detriment of the education system. Since teachers are in direct contact with students, they are best-placed to judge what the valuable materials are and discard some of the materials that appear to be a waste of time in the EFL curriculum. In addition, teachers have the capacity to ensure that learning activities are included for teaching within and outside the classroom. Therefore, policymakers are in the best position to work collaboratively with the government. In this case, I recommend opening the minds of policy makers to the possibility of incorporating flexibility into curriculum development in a bid to include important activities that are poised to yield better effectiveness in teaching EFL. This could be achieved by including the teachers in decision-making to ensure that the teaching materials in the classroom are the most suitable to be used by both teachers and students.

7.4.4 Challenges in Teaching

The research has also drawn attention to some of the problems that teachers encounter whilst teaching, and which can lower their motivation towards the implementation and the use of the curriculum. Policy makers, therefore, could play an important role in minimising these challenges by formulating flexible educational policies that allow teachers to use the most suitable and appropriate teaching practices and strategies in the classroom, including the use of self-developed supplementary materials. Policy makers could also devise ways in which to ensure that teachers were involved right from the initial stages of curriculum development, and ensure that teachers were given the freedom to use the best possible teaching practices that correspond fully to student needs.

These means in turn are geared towards restoring the motivation of teachers by allowing them to be active participants in curriculum development and to have the freedom to include outside class activities that motivate students to learn at a faster rate. As such, the policy makers should distinguish between inside and outside activities in order to endeavor to have a holistic education geared towards harmonious development. Teacher educators and supervisors could also play an important role in helping teachers overcome these challenges through providing them with on-going support and providing them with ample training opportunities. In this regard, Troudi and Alwan recommend that, 'training and support should be of great help in reducing the stressful effects of change during implementation' (2010, p. 117).

Training could actually include other processes of curriculum development like the planning process, designing process, and the evaluation process to ensure having more active and enthusiastic teachers who could contribute positively to curricula change.

Finally, and as Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) state, one of the best ways of overcoming challenges in the education system is to identify the available challenges through evaluation studies so as to be well prepared before meeting these challenges. Therefore, the fact that challenges in the design and development of

EFL curriculum are illustrated in this study, could entail that teachers and policy developers might have prior knowledge of these challenges and try to avoid them if there is to be any planned change to the curriculum. The challenges with educational administration, the time limitations and constraints, along with the actual implementation of the EFL curriculum are numerous and can affect the outcome of the educational process negatively if not mitigated. Thus a clear understanding of the teachers' role as being critical for future considerations by policy makers in the process of curriculum development should be given the first priority.

7.5 Avenues for Further Research

In view of the fact that the research project is the first of its type in this particular context in Syria, it is hoped that this study will pave the way for other research to be carried out in the near future in the Syrian context specifically, and in the field of education and curriculum studies in general.

Based on these current findings, there are several possible areas where research studies could be conducted. They could potentially include:

Specifically, such studies could be of great importance based on the new political landscape in Syria. They could assist in understanding whether these political factors have any influence or impact upon changing the attitudes of EFL teachers. Studying the political factors and their influence upon the EFL teaching sector in Syria could also provide an understanding as to whether English Language teaching policies and curriculum processes will remain the same or change.

Equally, they could help to establish whether English Language teaching will have the same value and status under wartime conditions in Syria. These studies could indicate whether the English language will lose the nascent importance that it was acquiring and that was so apparent in the first stages of conducting this current study in 2011; i.e. just before the start of the war there. Therefore, in order to examine the interrelationship between politics, curriculum change and development and how political factors can have an influence on teachers' attitudes regarding curriculum choices, there is a need for more research to focus on a detailed understanding of how EFL teachers view the influence of politics on their attitudes and practices.

The current study explores teachers' practices in the ELT classrooms, as well as the active implementation of the teaching materials. Different teaching approaches are detailed and justified by the various participants. Therefore, it is suggested to carry out an evaluative study of these different teaching approaches in the specific context of the study, to understand the effectiveness of each of those approaches. This could help to determine which approach could be the most suitable one for this particular context or whether a synthesis of more than one approach would be appropriate and could be developed.

Another study that suggests itself is to explore EFL teachers' professional development at the Higher Institute of Languages in Syria. This study could possibly lead to identifying the factors that might hinder or support EFL teachers' professional development programmes.

Future research could also seek to understand the importance that the inclusion of teachers might have in policy-making processes: such as language curriculum design and indeed other subjects as well.

It would also be worthwhile conducting a future study to examine existing policies governing education in Syria to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Understanding these policies and establishing valid and objective conclusions regarding their strengths and weaknesses could provide useful guidelines for amendment and policy formulation processes.

There appears to have been little research carried out about the contribution of technology to the field of education or to curriculum development in the Syrian context. Researchers and scholars could feasibly conduct studies on aspects of technology that are relevant to teaching, especially in the sector of EFL pedagogy. This is vital considering that the world has given rise to a post-industrial knowledge-based approach to life in general. The impact of technology upon other sectors of the economy is significant. This should provide a platform for an eventual investigation into the process of employing technology to enhance academic excellence.

In terms of methodological stance, this study employs an exploratory approach to the issues of EFL curriculum development and change. It has used a theoretical-exploratory approach based on the perceptions of teachers' responses and attitudes towards the problems encountered with the current EFL materials. This approach is generalised and has been presented in detail, but it equally could be used in divergent studies with a similar format and nature to the current study.

However, one suggestion could be to use a narrative enquiry as research methodology in a future research project to investigate teachers' attitudes regarding their contribution to potential curriculum development in the Syrian context. This form of enquiry may help to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers' individual views interact with the social world.

Similarly, the data concerning teachers' attitudes regarding their potential contribution to curriculum design and development and their teaching practices were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and interviews. Equally, teachers' practices inside the classroom could have been observed in their usual and authentic settings, in the teaching environment, and their views and opinions could be collected by means of a closed-ended questionnaire, after which the data could have been triangulated. Other studies could also apply other methods including quantitative instruments. This enables a clear provision and interpretation of data, meaning that the studies would contain measurable variables. Scholars and researchers can benefit from conducting qualitative studies across large populations to gain knowledge on the results of the study (Brinton *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, I suggest replicating the study by using a larger sample of EFL teachers at the other three Higher Institutes of Languages in Syria, so the data could then be more widely representative of the attitudes of EFL teachers from all around the country.

Moreover, since teachers often perceive themselves as competent at EFL curriculum design, their actual self-efficacy could be observed and measured in another study

both qualitatively and quantitatively. Furthermore, this could be undertaken not only in the Syrian context, but also in other different contexts around the world.

Finally, future studies could benefit from the foundation provided by this study. The present enquiry used a sample of teachers in Syria whose first language is not English. Therefore, researchers and scholars could investigate this issue in more depth. A discourse analysis of research conducted on the use of L1 and L2 could also be incorporated to include a study of the effects of using a second language to implement language teaching curricula.

Self-Reflection on my Research Journey

This last part of the thesis tracks the academic journey I have undergone in carrying out and completing the thesis. On a personal scale, this study has contributed extensively towards informing me of some of the salient matters in the field of education. I have gained a lot of insight into the difficulties experienced by language teachers, and this has enabled me to look at education from another perspective and in a different dimension. That is to say, acceptance of teachers' way of thinking is a virtue that I have developed throughout the process of conducting this study. In addition, this study has enabled me to gain a more in-depth understanding of some of the important theoretical approaches used in teaching. For example, the study has helped me to see the significance of a flexible curriculum that allows teachers to embrace the dynamic aspect of teaching practices, which enables the teacher to adapt and change strategies whenever the needs themselves of students in the classroom change.

The study provided a forum for looking at existing theories critically and identifying gaps in existing theories that need further attention and interpretation by other and future theorists. It has also enabled me to build upon ideas, facts and opinions regarding relevant arguments that coincide with the optimal design of EFL curriculum. In addition, I have developed a much clearer picture of the dilemma of students who suffer unknowingly due to issues of poor curriculum development. Most of those students can be recipients of both good and bad curriculum implementation. Therefore, I have realised the importance of regulation of the EFL curriculum change and development.

As much as I have encountered difficulties in the process of conducting this study, I believe that I have overcome most of these challenges, and I can confidently state that this study has inspired me to become a better researcher and hopefully improved my researcher's 'craft'. Therefore, it is important to develop a curriculum of high quality, and with elements that are designed according to the needs of students. This study has impressed upon me the importance of conducting high quality research that is unbiased. I have a lot of confidence that this research will contribute some valuable information and data to the existing literature. As such, this

study has led me to the realisation that, the integrity of the data is the key towards overcoming all research challenges and the drawing of valid and objective conclusions.

The process of conducting this research has enabled me to take a different look into the exploratory approach in the educational sector. I have gained the experience of basing my recommendations on having explored comprehensively the critical aspects of what I perceive to be the principle problem in the educational system in Syria. Therefore, this research has equipped me with the necessary skills that are transferable to other studies. I am confident that other researchers and scholars can benchmark this study in their quest to develop exploratory studies. Throughout the process of conducting this research, I have gained a lot of insight into the logistics and the process of carrying out research. This has included being able to access literature for carrying out a review of literature, that is not only conclusive, but also relevant to the study. Most of the problems encountered in the implementation process come from a poor management system. The process of conducting this research has also enabled me to understand the crucial role that management and leadership has on any organisation. Therefore, I am confident that I can avoid such problems in the future, if I should happen to be in a position of decision-making in the education sector. This also highlights the transferability of experience gained in one sector to another sector.

The ability to understand the root causes of problems has enabled me to maintain an open and critical mind whilst evaluating any process, so as to avoid addressing superficial causes at the expense of major causes of problems. Consequently, I will be further able to identify the major cause of problems and draw an optimum solution in the future. This is crucial not only in research, but also in every aspect of everyday life as it enables me, and the reader to design solutions that solve a problem from its root cause; thereby enabling people to avoid the future recurrence of the same problems.

In a general sense, this research has enabled me to understand the importance of knowledge management in improving the competitive advantage of any organisation. Even though the principle of knowledge management is actively used

in many industries to improve the productivity and efficiency of these industries, it is clearly lacking in the educational sector. This borne out by the fact that the teachers' opinions are not sought out in the quest to improve achievement in sectors such as language teaching. This research has imparted in me the importance of carrying out consultations in an educational institution as a measure of obtaining and determining the crucial contribution of employees who are the backbone of the productivity and efficiency of processes in an organisation. Therefore, I have learnt that seeking out the opinion and suggestions of those who put into action the directives imposed upon them is crucial in improving the eventual implementation of policies and principles in an organisation.

Appendices

Appendix A

An example of the strategic plan of the development of the educational programmes for Damascus University as outlined in the MOHE document.

Objective: 2 Development of Educational Programs			Period for Implementation												
No	Measure	Quarter No.	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4
		year	07	08	08	08	08	09	09	09	09	10	10	10	10
2.1	Defining "Excellence in Higher Education" at Damascus University		•	•											
2.2	Commissioning external experts for subject areas to assist in the development of programs' specifications and ILOs"		•	•	•	•	•								
2.3	Developing guidelines on preparation of programs' specifications, and ILO development"		•	•											
2.4	Determine market needs	Conducting research nationally and regionally on market needs in reference to required language and other related skills and competences, and future subject needs in graduating students		•	•										
2.5		Assessing the portfolio of Damascus University for existing programs and directions and opportunities for growth				•	•								
2.6	For existing academic programs	Articulating academic standards (faculties missions, program, aims, specifications, and programs/courses' ILOs)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•						
2.7		Conducting self-evaluation (review) of programs		•	•	•	•	•	•	•					
2.8		Developing new program specifications and curricula			•	•	•	•	•	•	•				
2.9		Developing strategies for teaching, learning, and assessment within the specifications				•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
2.10		Seeking approval (internal and external) from University, MOHE					•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
2.11	Existing programs	Implementing new program specifications						•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
2.12		Applying quality monitoring, evaluation and improvement processes for continual development of the academic programs							•	•	•	•	•	•	•

2.1 3	For new programs	Developing a template for proposals of new programs									•						
2.1 4		Identifying opportunities and existing strengths for expansion of programs based on markets needs assessments									•						
2.1 5		Developing strategic partnerships for the new programs										•	•	•	•		

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Question Probes

Experiences in teaching English

1. Can you tell me about your experiences of teaching English in this institute?
2. How long have you been teaching at this institute?
3. What is it that you like/ or don't like most about teaching this course?

Daily Teaching practices

4. What do you usually teach in your typical classes (i.e. skills, grammar, language, etc.)?
5. Can you tell me more about the materials that you use in your classes (i.e. textbook, workbook, teachers' book, supplementary materials, etc.)?
6. How do you usually plan for your lesson?
7. How do you present these materials for your students? (language, skills, grammar, etc.)?
8. How do you evaluate your students?
9. How do you evaluate your teaching?

Teaching challenges

10. What are the main challenges that you usually face when implementing your materials?
11. What challenges do you have for being professionally developed?
12. In your view point, what are the main challenges that prevent the achievement of the materials' goals and objectives?

Perspectives on teachers' involvement in curriculum development

13. What do you think of the idea of a potential development of a new curriculum for the institute?
14. How do you imagine this curriculum? How will it look like in terms of structure and/or content?
15. What thoughts do you have about the teachers' role in designing this potential curriculum? (planning, design)
16. If you were offered the chance to participate, what kind of involvement would you want to experience in designing the new curriculum?
17. In your opinion, what are the mechanisms of evaluating the new curriculum?

18. Given the current changing educational situation in Syria and the Arab World, what are your expectations/suggestions for a better future of teaching English?
19. How do you imagine the perfect conditions for teaching English as a Foreign Language?
20. If you had the power of decision-making, what would you add/remove/make in your current educational context to achieve these conditions?

Appendix C

A sample of semi-structured interview script

Maria

Researcher: Can you tell me about your experiences of teaching English in this current Institute?

Maria: I started teaching in 1/1/2007. I have been working for them for about five years apparently. I am responsible for teaching general English for beginner level students and business English for second year students at the Business College, Damascus University.

Researcher: What is it that you like/ or don't like most about teaching this course?

Maria: In my job I am treated more as a trainer rather than a teacher and so my students are likely to be more like clients. I like the experience of teaching business English for the first time. But I hate my duty timing. It is so tiring for me and recently it has affected my performance a little as a teacher.

Researcher: So what do you usually teach in your classes? What is your main focus, I mean?

Maria: I teach the four skills of the English language (writing, speaking, listening, and reading) in addition to vocabulary and structure. Sometimes, I teach some presentation skills. I am not required to do that by the management, though.

Researcher: and what about the materials, can you tell me more about the ones that you use in your classes (i.e. textbook, workbook, teachers' book, supplementary materials, etc.)?

Maria: For the beginner class, the course book is Face2Face. There is a workbook for the students attached to a CD. The workbook is full of exercises on the same structure and vocabulary discussed in the other book which is the students book in class we work on the students' book which is attached. As a teacher I have one extra teacher's CD full of exam samples. I am also provided with a teacher's book that includes many extra materials like games and songs in addition to the teaching tips for sure.

Researcher: Do you manage to cover all the pages in the textbook or you try to be selective?

Maria: I am selective as I am not given enough time to do so.

Researcher: How do you choose? According to what criteria?

Maria: actually I try to achieve the purpose of each unit. So I select the exercises that help me to do so and delete some repetitive exercises and I sometimes substitute two or three exercises with one extra exercise that is not derived from the book.

Researcher: and how do you usually plan for your lesson? Do you follow the teachers' book or you plan it your own way? Are there any considerations that you make while planning?

Maria: Well, I always take a look at the teachers' guidebook as it is useful for me to see the intended learning outcomes and provide me with a clear way of how I have to teach a certain activity. However, I do not strictly follow the guidebook as I have to adapt my teaching to what is happening in class and how the learners prefer to be taught.

Researcher: Can you tell me about it?

Maria: While planning my lesson I always expect that things may not go according to my plan and therefore it should be flexible and I have to prepare extra activities in case I need them. For example, once I was teaching the same level for two classes. So, lesson planning should be the same for both classes. Nevertheless, what was happening in each class was different every day. The learners in one of these classes were very active and preferred activities which highly require their involvement in delivering the lesson unlike the second class where most of the learners preferred to be silent and didn't

really feel comfortable when they were in charge of the lesson. I had to look for ways that help those shy silent students participate without bothering them.

Researcher: and how do you present these materials for your students (Language, skills, grammar, etc.)? Do you mind giving me details in this regard?

Maria: From my experience each class I teach is different. Depending on the type of students I choose my ways sometimes I teach in the traditional ways in which I write some sentences on the board, I ask students some questions about them and then present the grammatical rules for each. I then ask students to do some exercise to practice the rules. At other times the rules or the things are taught indirectly without feeling that I am directing students to them.

Researcher: So, do you follow a specific approach to teaching in your classes, while presenting the lesson, I mean?

Maria: As I said before, it all depends on the students themselves and the general atmosphere in class. I try my best to vary my approach so that it is not repetitive and boring. If I want to keep my students involved, I believe I have to use various or the so called mixed methods approach ranging from the traditional to learner-centred approaches.

Researcher: What do you mean by mixed method approach?

Maria: I mean by mixed method approach I vary the way I teach sometimes I am in control of what is happening in class and how I teach at other times it is the students themselves who choose how to be taught and they become in charge of their own learning. I let students teach each other and every student becomes the teacher here. I prefer this way because sometimes we are limited by the curriculum we have to cover, we have tests, there are students who do not like to be taught indirectly and they feel they are not learning if I wasn't directly explaining the grammatical rules or explaining the new vocab for example. So, depending on the type of learners, the activities themselves, the amount of time I have to cover the points I need to teach I choose my approach. In general, most of the times things don't go according to my plans.

Researcher: Shall I ask you now about the main challenges that you usually face when implementing your materials?

Maria: Well, there are lots of challenges when it comes to teaching. One of the main challenges is having students who don't like the teaching approach I follow.

Researcher: Could you tell me more about this and what do you do to overcome this challenge?

Maria: As I mentioned before, sometimes students do not feel they are learning if I don't explain things directly and write them on the board. Some students prefer for instance saying and writing on the board the meaning of this is x. they don't like it when I try to illicit the answers from their classmates. Some students have asked me to write every grammatical rule on the board and analyse sentences by cutting the words in explaining everything in a very direct way. When we start laughing in class and I ask students to participate most students feel they are enjoying their time while learning. Still I can have those who look at me with critical eyes as if they say oh no what are we doing here! Another challenge is having enough time to do all what I have planned for. Sometimes an activity takes a longer or shorter time than what I planned. The challenge becomes finishing on time or doing something else in the remaining time.

Researcher: What about evaluation? How do you evaluate your students?

Maria: officially speaking, there are 4 tests students take during the course in my centre.

Researcher: and how you assess their oral performance, then?

Maria: At the end of each unit, I use some of the textbooks extra materials like role plays and I ask students to perform them. Then, on a piece of paper, I write down some of the mistakes they make and give it to them.

Researcher: What about your own teaching? How do you evaluate it?

Maria: I always evaluate my teaching by students' response in class and their achievement in tests.

Researcher: Could you tell me more about this?

Maria: It is usually self-evaluated. At certain times the administration appoints someone from the Ministry of Higher Education to evaluate our classes and sometimes the administration asks us to observe each other and discuss our observations.

Researcher: what challenges do you have for being professionally developed?

Maria: the team I work with they are not interested in this idea at all.

Researcher: Of professional development?

Maria: some of my colleagues, for example, are so competitive. They do not like the idea of collaboration. They do not help me in implementing new ideas in teaching. They care mainly for their images as professional teachers who do not need help from others. I tried many times to talk to the management of doing some presentations or at least meetings. Meetings to talk about the teaching obstacles we face but all into dead ears.

Researcher: In your view point, what are the main challenges that prevent the achievement of the materials' goals and objectives?

Maria: When the material is not suitable for the students or culturally different I think the intended outcomes are not as they should be.

Researcher: can you give me an example about the cultural differences as being an obstacle?

Maria: Well, one example is having a child for unmarried couples. In our culture we always expect parents of children to be married. However, if you have to teach something that talks about relationships and having children out of wedlock, it might be tricky for some students who don't accept this idea or may be haven't heard about it before.

Researcher: What do you think of the idea of a potential development of a new curriculum for the institute?

Maria: it depends. I think we need the help of a professional here and I think we need to meet a lot and discuss a lot but it is a good idea after all. Personally, I think that we do not need to design our own curriculum I enjoy teaching the textbooks I have. However, we could do something else. For example, we could have a materials bank where we (teachers) share out materials and the extra activities we do together, discuss the objectives and the purposes, and the results gained after using these materials. As a teacher, I can help in adding some exercises to enrich the textbook I am teaching. However, I am not able to reflect the culture of the language taught in the same way a good textbook does.

Researcher: So, are you against this idea of creating a curriculum completely?

Maria: No, I am not against it completely.

Researcher: What is your understanding to the term curriculum?

Maria: I think curriculum means everything we teach. all materials used in teaching.

Researcher: Let me go back again to my previous point. Are you with or against this idea? I think you have mentioned that it is a good idea then you mentioned that it is not. So what do you think?

Maria: I am with the idea of teaching a good textbook. I was saying that I am with the idea of agreeing on the objectives of the curriculum, choosing a good text book that helps me as a teacher achieve these objectives, then modify the text book and support it with materials I design so teachers of the

Higher Language Institute should agree on the objectives, find a good textbook, and support the textbook with what is called, let's say for example, a material bank.

Researcher: Who decide if the textbook is good or not?

Maria: teachers

Researcher: Why and according to what?

Maria: According to the objectives they agree on and of course their objectives are related to the students' needs. I think teachers with the help of the management of course should agree on the objectives of the course then they choose the book that helps them the best and the most. Teachers directly choose the textbook. However, the learners or the students who actually decide on the materials they do that indirectly that brings us to the same idea which is the student' needs but I think it would be a good idea if we help the learners choose the things they want to learn. Sometimes that happens with me when a student asks me to help him in writing a report, for example, because he needs that at work. He is helping in developing the curriculum. I feel like a philosopher here. So back to your point here. I think teachers have to have a say in developing a curriculum that is designed around the needs of his/her students. It is not something optional. Well, put a long story short, both teachers and students develop the curriculum together.

Researcher: Now let's imagine that the institute decides to develop its own curriculum, what thoughts do you have about the teachers' role in designing this potential curriculum? May be you want to consider (planning, design), etc., (if there is any)

Maria: I think teachers should be the first to be consulted regarding this matter. We are in class with the students and we kind of have developed an understanding of what students prefer or don't prefer. We should be involved in all stages I believe.

Researcher: If you were offered the chance to participate, what kind of involvement would you want to experience in designing the new curriculum?

Maria: I'd like to participate in selecting different activities which require us to change our teaching approach.

Researcher: Do you think you need any training in this regard?

Maria: Sure. Training is needed. For example, it is easy for me to criticise the evaluation system we have but it is difficult to give an alternative one. Yes, I need training in this field first.

Researcher: How do you imagine this curriculum? How will it look like in terms of structure and/or content?

Maria: it will meet the needs of the students more than the previous one.

Researcher: why do you think so?

Maria: because the aim of changing it in the first place is to do so. I mean developing it.

Researcher: In your opinion, what are the mechanisms of evaluating the new curriculum? Deciding if it achieved what it is designed to achieve

Maria: Piloting the new curriculum and distributing surveys for both teachers and students.

Researcher: how?

Maria: Before deciding to change to implement the new curriculum, we have to pilot it in different classes to see if it works. At the same time, we need to see what teachers and students think about it, how they feel while teaching and learning, and what things worked well and things which were unsuccessful.

Researcher: Given the current changing educational situation in Syria and the Arab World, what are your expectations/suggestions for a better future of teaching English?

Maria: teaching English is becoming more challenging for teachers.

Researcher: Do you think it will be affected by the changing political situation(s) as well?

Maria: yes

Researcher: how?

Maria: I strongly believe that education is controlled by politics and that is why I think it will be affected by the changing political situation.

Researcher: How do you imagine the PERFECT conditions for teaching English as a Foreign Language?

Maria: This is a difficult question as perfection is never attainable and what works in one class may not work in another. I can say that in the perfect conditions I as a teacher should be allowed to be flexible in terms of what to cover in the curriculum, make teaching less concerned with the results of tests as they do not necessarily measure students' attainment in class, and give students the chance to participate in their own learning.

Researcher: So, if you had the power of decision-making, what would you add/remove/make in your current educational context to achieve these conditions?

Maria: I would give teachers more control over teaching their classes in ways which suit the class they are teaching without worrying about curriculum coverage and allow teachers respond more to students' individual needs.

Appendix D

The Open-ended Questionnaire

Dear EFL Instructors,

I am a sponsored doctoral student from the University of Damascus, doing a PhD in Curriculum Design at the University of Exeter in the UK. The purpose of my study is to find out what attitudes the EFL teachers have about their participation in the process of ELT curriculum change and development. Because you teach English as a foreign language and you have some experience in ELT and in the main challenges that are faced by teachers in curriculum implementation, I am inviting you to kindly participate in this study by responding to this questionnaire. The questionnaire contains 30 open-ended questions and completing it should approximately take about fifty-five to sixty minutes of your time.

I would like also to emphasise that your participation is entirely voluntary and that you can decide to withdraw at any stage. In addition, your responses will be kept as anonymous and confidential as possible to avoid any kind of potential harm and will be used for the sole purpose of the study. Finally, you can gain access to the findings of the research at the end of the study if you are interested.

Your participation will be of a great value to help me in conducting my study. Therefore, I would appreciate your taking the time to answer all the items in the questionnaire and contacting me if you have any concerns or if you need any further clarification.

Thank you very much in advance for your time and co-operation.

Israa Mawed
im232@exeter.ac.uk

I. What are the actual practices used by EFL teachers for the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?

1. Can you tell me about your educational and professional experiences?

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2. What do you normally teach in your typical classes (skills, grammar, language, etc.)?

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.....

3. What approach to teaching do you normally follow in your daily teaching?

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.....

4. How can you describe the current materials that you use in your classroom? You may like to consider aspects such as structure, content, scope, length, etc.

.....
.....

5. How do you usually deal with the learners' different learning needs in a language class?

.....
.....

6. Do you make any considerations to the learners' different learning styles while you are planning your language lesson?

.....
.....

7. Can you tell me about your teaching practices in a typical language class? (Please provide some examples of teaching language skills.)

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.....

8. What kind of assessment do you conduct in your classes?

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.....

9. How is your teaching usually evaluated? Do you evaluate it yourself or is it evaluated by others?

.....
.....

II. What is the nature of the challenges for EFL teachers in implementing the ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?

10. From your teaching experience, what are the main barriers that prevent the achievement of the aims and objectives of the English language course?

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11. What challenges do teachers have in implementing the current materials?

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12. Considering the notion of 'professional development' and your current teaching experience, what do you think the main challenges; the teachers in this context have, for becoming a better teacher?

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13. What do you need in order to improve your teaching of English performance?

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14. Considering your experience in class again and the teaching materials you use; do you think the institute needs to develop a new curriculum? Can you tell me what thoughts do you have about this?

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15. In your view point, what are the main reasons behind the potential need for a new curriculum?

.....
.....

III. How do EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages view the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation?

16. What is your understanding of the notion of curriculum?

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17. What attitudes do you have about the main features of a potential new curriculum?

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18. What thoughts do you have about the teachers' role in designing a new curriculum?

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19. Do you think the current educational climate offers a space for teachers to have input in the desired new curriculum?

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20. If you were offered the chance to participate, what kind of involvement would you want to experience in designing the new curriculum?

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.....

21. Do you think you have the ability to participate in the process of designing a new curriculum? Why do you think so?

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22. Do you feel that you need a special training in order to be able to participate in the process of designing a new curriculum, what needs can you identify in this regard?

.....
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23. Do you believe that developing a new curriculum might lead to improvements in the teaching process? What thoughts do you have about this?

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24. Given the current curriculum situation in your context, what are your expectations about the possibility of developing a successful curriculum?

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25. Do you think that your involvement in curriculum development will help you in your teaching practice?

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26. If teachers do not contribute to the development of the new curriculum what will be the consequences?
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.....
27. In your opinion, what are the mechanisms of evaluating the new curriculum and who should take part in the evaluation process?
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.....
28. Given the current changing educational situation in Syria and the Arab World, what are your expectations/suggestions for a better future of teaching English?
-
.....
29. If you had the power of decision-making, what would you add/remove/make in your current educational context to achieve the perfect conditions for teaching English, as you imagine it?
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.....
30. Please add any comments that you would like to talk about regarding other aspects related to curriculum development and which are not mentioned in this questionnaire.
-
.....

Appendix E

A sample of a completed open-ended Questionnaire

What are the actual practices used by EFL teachers for the current ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?

1. **Can you tell me about your educational and professional experiences?**

I have an MA in English Language Teaching. I have taught English for about 5 years.

2. **What do you normally teach in your typical classes (skills, grammar, language, etc.)?**

Skills, grammar, language, etc.

3. **What approach to teaching do you normally follow in your daily teaching?**

We go over the previous days assignments and homework. Ask if anyone has any questions before we continue on to the next lesson. I give a brief explanation of the days lesson and then hand out worksheets. I also like putting the students in groups to work on assignments

4. **How can you describe the current materials that you use in your classroom? You may like to consider aspects such as structure, content, scope, length, etc.**

Nowadays we teach Face2Face series which is based on CLT. Some levels are suitable for our learners such as the Pre-intermediate and Intermediate. However, the Upper-intermediate is not because it students' can't relate to the topics presented. Also, it aims at teaching some grammatical points that aren't commonly used or heard. It's true that we have lots of speaking activities there but these ignore our culture and so students don't feel motivated enough to participate in class discussions. Another problem is that reading texts are very simple and the comprehension questions are based on copying the answers directly from the text. So, they don't enhance student's critical thinking's skills.

5. **How do you usually deal with the learners' different learning needs in a language class?**

I make sure they're falling behind because they're not paying attention. So I make them sit up front beside me. After they are still having difficulties keeping up with the class, I ask them to come in early for extra help, that way I can teach them one on one and find out their specific weaknesses

6. **Do you make any considerations to the learners' different learning styles while you are planning your language lesson?**

Definitely

7. **Can you tell me about your teaching practices in a typical language class? (Please provide some examples of teaching language skills.)**

I like to use engagement. For example, when teaching new vocabulary I will query the class to see if anyone knows the definition. Once we have some discussion about the definition (and subsequent alternate definitions and use for the word). I will write it on the board so the students can see how it is spelled. I will then break down the word phonetically to ensure correct pronunciation and invite the students to use the word in different sentences with different meanings correcting pronunciation and grammar throughout the process.

8. What kind of assessment do you conduct in your classes?

Usually through homework or through spelling tests and end of week tests

9. How is your teaching usually evaluated? Do you evaluate it yourself or is it evaluated by others?

I have been formally evaluated, as per university policy, by a visiting supervisor who will evaluate lesson plan, delivery, etc. A good teacher will also evaluate themselves on an ongoing basis. When students can understand and use a concept then the teacher has done a good job, when students cannot, then the teacher must continue to use alternate methods for information assimilation.

What is the nature of the challenges for EFL teachers in implementing the ELT materials at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages?

10. From your teaching experience, what are the main barriers that prevent the achievement of the aims and objectives of the English language course?

I usually find that if the student is not motivated enough to study this can lead to problems with the final outcome.

11. What challenges do teachers have in implementing the current materials?

The books used for the last semester were not culture specific so certain chunks of the book had to be avoided.

12. Considering the notion of 'professional development' and your current teaching experience, what do you think the main challenges; the teachers in this context have, for becoming a better teacher?

The main challenges are the lack of proper professional development of the teaching staff overall.

13. What do you need in order to improve your teaching of English performance?

I would like to be able to complete my DELTA. This would give me a better understanding and more insight into current teaching practices.

14. Considering your experience in class again and the teaching materials you use; do you think the institute needs to develop a new curriculum? Can you tell me what thoughts do you have about this?

The current curriculum is being over hauled to make things more culture specific.

15. In your view point, what are the main reasons behind the potential need for a new curriculum?

How do EFL teachers at the Syrian Higher Institute of Languages view the future of teachers' involvement in the processes of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation?

16. What is your understanding of the notion of curriculum?

17. What attitudes do you have about the main features of a potential new curriculum?

That it is suitable for a broad spectrum of language learners and not just the majority.

18. What thoughts do you have about the teachers' role in designing a new curriculum?

As it is the teacher who is delivering the curriculum it is crucial that the teacher is involved in its development.

19. Do you think the current educational climate offers a space for teachers to have input in the desired new curriculum?

Not to the extent that is needed.

20. If you were offered the chance to participate, what kind of involvement would you want to experience in designing the new curriculum?

I would like to act in the role of consultant. Given my 20 years plus teaching.

21. Do you think you have the ability to participate in the process of designing a new curriculum? Why do you think so?

Yes I have the ability. This would be due to my considerable knowledge and experience gained over my years in teaching.

22. Do you feel that you need a special training in order to be able to participate in the process of designing a new curriculum, what needs can you identify in this regard?

No I feel I don't need any training in this area.

23. Do you believe that developing a new curriculum might lead to improvements in the teaching process? What thoughts do you have about this?

Yes I do. I would give a fresh approach for the teachers involved in delivering it.

24. Given the current curriculum situation in your context, what are your expectations about the possibility of developing a successful curriculum?

I can only say that a change in books would be a positive move for certain levels.

25. Do you think that your involvement in curriculum development will help you in your teaching practice?

Not really!

26. If teachers do not contribute to the development of the new curriculum what will be the consequences?

Potentially this could be a disaster due to the fact that it is crucial that the teacher has an input as they will be delivering it. The teacher will also be aware of their own abilities and their students.

27. In your opinion, what are the mechanisms of evaluating the new curriculum and who should take part in the evaluation process?

Firstly, I think any new curriculum should be piloted for a semester with a section of students and after a series of checks should be redeveloped if necessary.

28. Given the current changing educational situation in Syria and the Arab World, what are your expectations/suggestions for a better future of teaching English?

Better communication between management and teachers. Realistic targets for the lower levels.

29. If you had the power of decision-making, what would you add/remove/make in your current educational context to achieve the perfect conditions for teaching English, as you imagine it?

As mentioned above more teacher autonomy.

Appendix F
A sample of Coding

Needs Analysis (NA)

1. *I use other materials to illustrate or expand [up]on certain points which could be difficult to low students. [Ramia/ Q4]*
2. *I try to make the class activities as diverse as possible so that I can cover everything the students need. [Layan/ Q6]*
3. *I try to dedicate some time to every learner, but even this can be hard in large classes. [Sana/ Q7]*
4. *I try as much as possible to vary the way I teach them and I try to bring extracurricular activities that respond to their needs. I also give them the space to participate in managing their course and direct[ing] it to satisfy their needs. [Yara/ In5]*
5. *I use a variety of methods to appeal to students' varying learning needs including: auditory, experiential, visual, etc. Use of smart boards, white boards, recordings and the like are helpful but I have found the best tool is to develop a positive and engaging relationship with the students in the class based on respect and a desire to learn English and enjoy the process. [Rami/ Q14]*
6. *There are different things. I mainly give them advice and ways to improve their English. For those who need writing, I encourage them to write some extra assignments and keep a journal in English if they want. I provide them with some topics to encourage them to write. Also, I assign my students a set of five graded readers at the beginning of each course to read during the course. I tell them that this helps improve their reading and vocabulary so students who want to speed [up] their reading or improve their vocabulary can do this. For speaking, I ask those who want to improve their speaking to record their speech using their mobile phones and listen*

to themselves and repeat it many times. They sometimes send me these recordings via Bluetooth for feedback. I provide them with a set of questions to motivate them to do it. [Samar/ In1]

- 7. The teacher must be aware of the individual differences between students; therefore low level students must [be] give[n] extra homework and questions to encourage them to practise English. As for in-class practice, I usually put strong students with weak students and let them help each other. I also try to have easy and difficult activities in every class to help weak students and challenge strong students. I give all students homework every day. [Firass/ Q24]*
- 8. In classes with different levels I usually use multiple clustering (different levels at the same group/pair) and single clustering (similar levels at the same group/pair) with more attention to weaker students that depends on the level, material, component, number of students, etc. [Leena/ Q3]*
- 9. I don't think it will be a good idea to conduct an analysis for the learners needs before the start of the programme. This will be detached from the actual learners who are going to take the course. However, this should be done by the first couple of lessons and no more than that. [Bahaa/ Q20]*

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